

# **CALLED TO BE A HAPPY WORKER BEE**

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**Judges 4:1-7; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30**

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There is a phrase that came to me as a teenager from my mother, my stepmother since my birth mother died in childbirth when I was three days old, a phrase that still comes frequently to my mind that today heralds what this homily is all about. “I would rather burn- out, than rust-out, and I will live my life that way as long as I have breath.” She was a barely five foot two Welsh lady that even at 71 when she died, she had minimal gray hairs. She had all the Hudspeth of a person twice her size, and she emanated that strength to that day she left us. Obviously not my blood mother, however, she instilled in me that working and living required inner motivation, rigor and persistence with a smile on your face.

The lessons this day particularly the Old Testament and Gospel celebrate motivation, rigor and persistence. Judges 4, the only reading from the book of Judges in the three year lectionary, introduces us to the prophetess Deborah whose name literally means “bee,”- queen bee if you would go that far. Deborah is recognized by her Israelite sisters and brothers as a “mover” and a “shaker” in the community. She is distinguished as one having judicious gifts and able to settle issues and discrepancies. She also is recorded as one who talked with Yahweh and understood the Lord’s desires for his people. The Israelites had fallen away again and were under the authority of the Canaanite king Jabin. Specifically they were being oppressed by Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, who was exceptionally cruel and violent. Deborah reached out to her friend Barak asking him to gather forces from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali to take Hazor, the Canaanite stronghold city. Barak agrees to go only if Deborah, the spiritual one, accompanies him which she does. Barak storms down on Sisera and Sisera’s nine hundred iron chariots and men, and they suffer defeat, but Sisera goes off on foot toward the tent of Heber the Canaanite, assuming his protection. But the final victory over Sisera occurs because of still another woman, revered later with Deborah, one named Jael, the wife of Heber. If you remember the story Jael invites Sisera into the tent to stay the night, gives him warm milk instead of the water he asks for, and then, when he is asleep, hammers a tent peg into his temple. Barak reaches the tent and Jael shows him the dead Sisera.

What is the point of this passage, the point for us? Deborah, the “bee” with divine connections understands Yahweh’s hatred of oppressors, Canaanite or Israelite, for God punished his own people for oppressing others as well. Deborah acts on what she knows of God, seeks out Barak, supports him in his willingness to take on the deed, violence for violence, and then persists in assisting the takedown. We might draw some parallels in the recent takedown of both Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi. What we see here is the willingness to pursue the intent of God to remove oppression, in whatever guises, and to persist in action until it is accomplished. We might hold on to this story as an accomplishment of justice.

The rich passage from I Thessalonians 5 has to do with a basic attitude toward life after you know Jesus Christ as your Savior. Someone has summarized this passage as saying, “Be patient, wear a smile a lot, and definitely be kind.” The early community in Thessalonica was struggling with cults and idol worship in 48 to 50A.D. when the letter was written. Paul reminds them that Jesus will return but the hour is uncertain, and yes, people are dying and will die before his return, but he has assured us that when we die we are with him. In many ways Paul is allaying their fears by saying if you just think about Christ’s return like a “thief coming in the night,” and you remain ready and calm all the time, you don’t have to be anxious or in turmoil. Paul says the best things to do are fairly simple: have control over your sexuality, keep your speech and therefore your thoughts in the right place, love each other from the heart, putting all else away as temptation. Another translation puts it this way, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, minding your own business, doing honest work with your hands.” The image we are given is living in the daylight, not in the unsettledness of night. So therefore, Paul becomes an encourager in Christ, a Barnabas call for us all.

Keeping in mind the “bee” image, we might simply say we are called to be happy and contented bees who love to live in the sunlight.

Finally the Gospel from St. Matthew 25 is all about working in trust and security, and banishing fear from the mind and soul. The parable begins with the well-off property owner putting his property in the hands of his slaves or servants. This indeed was a practice of the time. The talents were huge sums of money. The well informed tell us that one talent was enough to keep a slave at subsistence level for fifteen years. So, the owner giving five talents and secondly two talents to what might be called his best producers seems to be a reasonable expectation. These servants understood that the master or owner was one who expected his workers to use and make more money with what they were given. This was true for the servant who was given the single talent as well. So, we might assume that the owner had made his decision about the competency

of these three men, realizing their performances from the past, but nevertheless, giving all three the opportunity to do something with their trust. When the owner returns, his confidence in the first two is proven justified. And his words to them are most reassuring of what the servants probably expected. They understood that what they were given was meant to be used, to be risked in investment, to be laid out in this world and done something significant with. We know that the third servant has not done so, and we wonder what the master's response will be.

The way the owner treats the third slave, even though the slave may not have had the same acumen to invest, has to do with the slave's refusal to even try. The word the owner uses is "lazy." We might use the word "fearful" or "self absorbed." Whatever, it is clear in the parable that the owner, easily translated to being God, expects people to use what they have been given, and the refusal to do that, brings condemnation. The servant didn't even put it in a bank. He hid it, buried it. He acted like he had not even been given it. At best, you might say he put it in a safe place so he would not lose it. But knowing that his master was most interested in his doing something of investment with the talent, he absolutely ignored the master's most important wish from the outset, and acted as one commentator named it, stupidly. He doomed himself, or as we might call it, "he shot himself in the foot," provoking the owner's greatest anger.

This parable is about God's design for each of us. We are called to use all the gifts we have been given to bear interest for God. Yes, this is about money for a business man or woman. For the object of money and having money is to make more money. Merely hoarding money might just as well mean throwing it away- that's the corollary. We all understand this idiom. Maybe that's why Jesus chose it. But the wisdom to be gleaned from this parable is that all that God has given us, our selves, our lives, our faith, our abilities, our gifts, yes our possessions, are given to us to be spent, to be put into circulation, to be expended in God's service. To try to merely preserve them is to lose them. And when we are completely honest with ourselves and our behavior, we know this is absolutely the truth. The servant who lost his talent in the story, also loses his eternal self in the final reality.

I began this homily with my mother's words, "I'd rather burn out, than rust out in the days I have." Surely, Deborah, the bee, exerted that kind of energy in bringing down the Canaanites. Surely, Paul's words to the Thessalonians about staying grounded, living in the light and keeping a smile on your face even in the face of abuse is essential. And, Jesus' parable about using what you have been given is a matter of life and death.

So, the simple title of this teaching bears remembering: *Called to Be a Happy Worker Bee.*

