

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost – November 15, 2020

Introduction

As we approach the end of the Church year on Christ the King Sunday [November 22], the focus of the Gospel is on how to live ‘in the shadow of eternity.’ In Matthew, we encounter three parables: the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens, the Parable of the Talents, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats [also known as the Parable of the Great Judgement]. The first two focus on **how we should wait** and the third **sets the standard of judgment** [next week’s Gospel].

In today’s Gospel, we are encouraged to be active believers. Knowing that there will be an end to all things is the driving force behind our work in the Kingdom. I suspect that God is more than able to provide opportunities for service. Our task is to be open to actually doing this work.

Pastoral Note

Now that election day has passed, we again need to focus on the dangers associated with coronavirus pandemic and public safety. The latest numbers indicate that the next spike in infection rates has arrived. This time, it is centered in the Midwest with the Dakotas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa showing dramatic increases in those testing positive for Covid-19. Local news outlets in the Twin Cities talk about hospitals being nearly at capacity. Please stay at home. If you must go out, please use your mask and practice social distancing. This is not a political statement. I believe that it is caring those around us.

I do not know when in sanctuary worship will begin in our parish. As we approach the Christmas season, many of us still hope for a traditional Christmas service in the sanctuary with the singing of Christmas songs. It remains to be seen if this will be possible. One of our national public health officials suggested that we should limit our celebrations for the upcoming holidays this year so that **we will all be able to celebrate them together next year.** [Sorry, I do not remember the person’s name.] Our Lord has indicated that we are responsible for others as well as for ourselves. Fortunately, both Immanuel and Bethel have been blessed with strong leadership and they will make the best decision possible at the appropriate time.

**In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve**

Gospel – Matthew 25.14-40

“Investing in the Future”

Let us pray. Almighty God, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We ask this day that you would help us to pray earnestly ‘thy Kingdom come’ and to wait with joyful expectation for the return of your Son. But until that day comes, bless us with

wisdom and strength so that we might continue to bear witness to you and do the work you have called us to do. Give us the will and the wisdom to multiply the gifts you have given us as we wait for your Son's return when his servants will be invited to enter into the joy of the Kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Several years ago. I came across a strange news story about hidden money. It was in either the St. Paul Pioneer Press or the Minneapolis Tribune. A man who had recently purchased an old house from an estate saw something in a heating duct near the register. When he removed the register, he found two small packages wrapped tightly in tin foil. When he opened them, he discovered that each package contained \$10,000 — a total of \$20,000.

Some quick research revealed the name of the previous owner. He returned the money to the family of the old woman who had died. Her family said that she had told them she hidden away some money in her house for them to have in the event of her death. Her children had already found a considerable amount of money before the house was sold. The \$20,000 was a complete surprise.

Stories of hidden money have always intrigued me. Why do people hide money? Perhaps they do not trust banks. Perhaps they do not trust certain family members. Or perhaps, they are afraid of being robbed. When I was serving in Donnelly Minnesota, several farmers tell stories about 'jars of silver and gold coins' that would be unearthed when they plowed their fields. The dates on the silver dollars and the gold coins were from the 1920's and 30's. I can understand the reason; banks were failing during the Great Depression. A jar in the ground might well have been safer. Tragically, human memory and circumstance being what they are, these precious caches were either forgotten or lost.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples a story that we know as The Parable of the Talents.' More often than not, sermons based on this parable have a stewardship theme; which, I think, is all well and good. We can never hear enough about Christian stewardship. Stewardship is always about recognizing the gifts that God has given us and how we use these gifts in service of the Kingdom. But I think there is also something else here; something of equal importance to stewardship. The 'Parable of the Talents' is a warning to disciples about the dangers of 'playing it safe' with our salvation. Obviously, we are not talking about a game of football or a hand of poker; but rather, how to live until the Lord returns.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man who prepares to leave on a long journey. We know this story as the 'Parable of the Talents.' A 'talent' is unit of money. One

commentary indicates that a ‘talent’ was the equivalent of fifteen [15] years of wages. It suffices to say that this is a good deal of money.

Before the Master departs, he calls his servants together to divide his wealth among them.

Please understand that these servants were slaves, not free men. They had no property of their own. In their Master’s absence, they were to be his stewards and act on his behalf. They were to ‘*take care of business.*’ To one, he gave five talents; to another, two talents; and to yet another, he gave one talent. A talent in today’s currency would be worth about a quarter of a million dollars. Even the last servant with one talent was given an immense fortune to care for. After a long while, the master returned to settle accounts with his servants. The one with five talents invested wisely and earned five more. Likewise, the servant with two talents. But the last servant did differently. He buried the talent in the ground and waited for the Master’s return.

The ‘Parable of the Talents’ ends with the first two servants being rewarded for their stewardship of the Master’s money.

They invested and made more for him; but the last servant did not. He ‘*played it safe.*’ The third servant simply buried the talent and waited for the Master’s return. When he was called for a final accounting, the Master judged him harshly because he did nothing with what he had been given. Jesus concludes the parable rather ominously, ***‘YOU [ARE A] WICKED AND LAZY SERVANT... TAKE THE TALENT FROM HIM, AND GIVE IT TO THE ONE WITH TEN TALENTS. FOR TO ALL THOSE WHO HAVE, MORE WILL BE GIVEN, AND THEY WILL HAVE AN ABUNDANCE; BUT FROM THOSE WHO HAVE NOTHING, EVEN WHAT THEY HAVE WILL BE TAKEN AWAY. AS FOR THIS WORTHLESS SLAVE, THROW HIM INTO THE OUTER DARKNESS, WHERE THERE WILL BE WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH.’***

Matthew remembers this parable of Jesus because it applies directly to his community of faith in Antioch.

Its members were under persecution and they were beginning to fall away. As in the parable, their Master had gone away; it had been fifty years since the resurrection of Jesus. But like the Master in the parable, he had left servants in charge of his estate. Each had been made a steward of the Kingdom’s riches. They had full stomachs, clothes on their backs, and their families were around them. But most important, they had the life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life. But as in the ‘Parable of the Talents,’ the Master will return and call the accounts of his servants due. Their stewardship will be the standard by which they are to be judged when their Master returns. *What have they done with the money that has been given to them? Are they using it on behalf of the Master?*

At first reading, there doesn’t seem to be a lot of grace in our Lord’s words. We even feel a little bit sorry for the third servant. After all, he didn’t lose anything. And it seems that the

Master is unduly harsh with the cautious servant. *So what is Jesus' point? Why does he tell this parable?*

I think that this is a parable of judgment. Listen to the words Jesus uses. It is the story of a wealthy man who entrusts his estate to servants because he is 'going on a journey' and will be gone for a long time. At the end of the parable, the man returns 'after a long time' and settles his accounts with them. In the language of the early church, the image of the Master who leaves and then returns 'after a long time' is always taken to refer to Jesus. In his absence, those who follow him — his servants — are given charge the Kingdom. When the Master returns, he settles accounts with them. He wants to know what they have done with what he has given them.

Another clue is the parable's context in Matthew's Gospel. It follows the 'Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens' which concludes with the advice to keep watch because the Lord may return at any hour. Then, after the 'Parable of the Talents,' we find Jesus' parable of the final judgment where the King separates the sheep from the goats. That parable is a reminder that the Lord Jesus is intimately associated with those who suffer. ***AND THE KING SAID '... AS YOU DID IT TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE, MY BRETHREN, YOU DID IT TO ME.'*** The point that Jesus was trying to make with these three parables . . . The point that Matthew's church needed to hear . . . The point that we need to hear is that faithfulness to Jesus is the willingness to risk what one has received from the Lord for the sake of the Kingdom. God rewards those who use their gifts and punishes those who do not.

Now the difficult task. What is Jesus saying to us this morning when we hear his 'Parable of the Talents?' Three things, I think.

First, we will be judged by what we do while await the return of Christ. As Paul writes: ***'the time of his return is nearer than when we first believed.'*** This is not the time to 'play it safe.' It is not a time to sit around and wait for the Lord. In the 'Parable of the Talents,' the first and second servants are rewarded because they actively invested their Master's money. We don't even know if they were unscrupulous in their dealings or not. But we do know that the Master was happy because they did something with his money. The way I read the parable, I suspect that the Master would not have been upset even if they had lost the money making unwise deals. What is important is that they used what they were given on behalf of their Master. Actually, that is the stewardship dimension of this parable. We need to be active with the gifts that God has given us. A colleague of mine put it this way: ***'We are saved by faith alone . . . but faith that saves is never alone.'***

The third servant, however, did nothing. He 'played it safe' by burying the money in a hole and returning it in full to the Master. The Master deals harshly with him because he did not

even try to invest the money. The sin of the third was that he did not take his Master seriously when he was told him to go out and do business with the money. This is where it gets uncomfortable for us. Doing nothing while we wait for Jesus to return is the greatest danger Christians face. It is very easy to keep the status quo . . . To let somebody else do the Kingdom work . . . To just give the same amount money as we did last year . . . To go to church on Sunday when possible . . . and to interpret the Scripture in such a manner that it only affirms rather than challenges our faith.

Jesus wants something more. This parable implies that he is asking us to ‘live our faith’ so that it affects people around us. This means forgiving those who have hurt us . . . This means giving sacrificially rather than giving what is left over . . . And it means reaching out to those who some think are undesirable, unlovable, and unwelcome in our communities.

Second, we all have been given unique gifts for service in the Kingdom. No one is without a gift that would help the work of the Kingdom. God’s gifts are of many different kinds. Different people have different kinds of gifts. Some seem to be multi-talented, while others seem to do one or two things well. Immanuel and Bethel have been richly blessed by the gifts people have willingly shared on behalf of the Kingdom. There is room for everyone to be part of our parish’s ministry.

And finally third, those who use their gifts well are not given a pension and sent out to retirement; they are given more work. They have proven their faithfulness and commitment by using their gifts well so they will be given even greater responsibilities. I think that this is true for us. When we use our gifts fully, God opens up new and more exciting opportunities for us to serve the Kingdom.

Today, God presents us with a choice: ‘Action’ or ‘Inaction.’ Like I’ve said a number of times, discipleship is risky business. especially when it comes to our time, talent, and treasures. But before you decide, remember that God is into risk. God would buy stocks during a stock market crash. God would buy a ticket on the Titanic even though the iceberg was near. On the cross, God risked everything, even God’s own Beloved Son, so that you and I might have life with in the Kingdom. All God asks is that we take a chance on faith . . . That we take a chance on the love that will never let us go. Amen.