

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 19, 2017
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
Psalm 90:1-8
I Thessalonians 5:1-10
Matthew 25:14-15, 19-29

Today's Gospel lesson is what we have come to know as Jesus' parable of the talents. I must confess that every time I've ever heard this text preached, the theme of the sermon has been on stewardship -- the proper stewardship of our time, our money, our resources, and especially our talents and abilities. Such sermons become good grist for the preacher's mill when preaching during yearly stewardship campaigns, or when the annual budget is being hammered out.

On the surface, this parable appears very much to fit this pattern of the proper stewarding of our resources and talents. Indeed, I will go so far as to say that this parable is about stewardship -- *but not the stewardship of money or material things*. To read it such, as we often do, is to miss Jesus' deeper and more fundamental point.

To discover Jesus' more fundamental teaching here we need to pay attention to matters of context. The context of this text -- that is, where it is located -- will help us to better read the details of the story and to see important truth which we may have missed before.

The parable of the talents is located in the portion of Matthew's Gospel known as Jesus' eschatological discourse (chapters 24-25). That is, Jesus is teaching in these two chapters things related to the end times, the consummation of the world.

Jesus' "end times" discourse contains several parables that emphasize the need to be prepared for the master's return. They include:

- * The parable of the Unfaithful Servant (24:45-51)
- * The parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (25:1-13)
- * The parable of the Talents (25:14-30)

A careful reading of these three parables would reveal that their central theme is one of *judgment*. The master is going to return at an unexpected time, and servants are called to be prepared. Interestingly, this is the theme of our other Scripture lessons today also. The prophet Zephaniah warns a people who have become jaded by their materialism that swift judgment is coming.

The Psalmist shows us that our 70 or 80 years of life is all under the judgment of God, and asks God to teach us wisdom to live our lives to their full potential.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, tells them that the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.

And Jesus speaks here of a man who goes away on a trip, entrusting his servants or employees talents which they are to manage while he is away.

Now both the Thessalonians and the church in Matthew's Gospel struggle with the same issue. They are struggling with the *delay* of Jesus' second coming. They have been expecting his immediate and imminent return, and the days and weeks and years just keep going by, and he still hasn't showed up.

In such a situation, people can become a little lax and complacent. As we know too well, it is *very hard to sustain intense diligence for a long period of time*.

People can begin to think that maybe a delay in Jesus' return means that he is not coming at all. And so they live differently in light of that. Sort of like when my parents used to go away for what I thought would be a long time. For me, that meant all bets were off, and I could do whatever I wanted.

So, let's pause here and summarize where we are at. Our parable, the parable of the talents, comes to us in the middle of Jesus' "end time" discourse where he is speaking about the end of the world and the need for preparation at the master's return.

More specifically, Jesus' words here *occur in the temple during Holy Week*. In other words, *he is preparing for his Passion, and for his return to the Father*. In the words of our parable, he is about to embark on a long trip where he entrusts his servants with something very valuable and important.

But if this parable is not about the stewardship of money and material things, what is it about?

Let's look at the text itself.

The parable begins with a man who goes away on a trip and entrusts his servants with talents.

Prior to Jesus' day, a *talent* was originally a measure of weight. It was the heaviest weight in the Hebrew system. It was used to weigh gold, iron, bronze, and other commodities.

In time, a talent came to mean a certain sum of money, and a great sum at that, probably around 15-20 years of earnings for the common laborer.

In the parable, the master summons three servants and gives them 5 talents, 2 talents, and 1 talent respectively, according to their abilities.

The first two servants invest what is given to them, and double it. The third servant takes what is given and buries it in a hole in the ground for safekeeping.

The master returns after a long absence, praising the first two servants for their labors, and castigating the third as a "wicked and lazy" servant.

We typically read and preach this text, then, as an admonition to make the most of what God has given us in our lives -- to use and invest our talents and abilities for the Kingdom of God.

This is not necessarily wrong. But as we've just seen, the original meaning of the word "talent" had nothing to do with *ability*, which is the customary way we tend to view it.

So once again we ask: If this parable is not about the stewardship of money, or even of our abilities and talents, then what is Jesus saying?

Here's what I would submit to you. The master does indeed give to his servants a great treasure and a wonderful opportunity. But it isn't the opportunity of setting up a Goldman Sachs office on the corner and making a fortune in olive oil options.

When you read this parable carefully -- along with what comes before and after it -- it seems clear that Jesus is preparing his readers for his Passion and his departure, *and in so doing he is committing to them the great treasure of the Gospel message*. He wants his servants (i.e., the Church) to “go into all the world” and share the message of forgiveness of sins, of the new life that he now offers.

And the plain fact of the matter is that sharing the Gospel message involves *risk*. We are often so busy scolding the servant who buries his talent in the ground that we forget that the other two servants had to take risk and to act boldly in order to do what they did.

To be the Church that Jesus has called us to be involves risk. We cannot get by with hiding our light under a bushel. To try to care for others, to try to minister to others, to try to witness to our faith, to try to give to others, are things

that call us out of our comfort zone and challenge us to risk for the sake of Christ and the Kingdom.

Interestingly, rabbinic law condoned and even supported what the third servant did when he buried his talent in the ground. Rabbinic law taught that burying money was an acceptable way of safeguarding it, and when a person did so he/she was free of its responsibility and could not be held accountable for its loss.

Jesus' word, it seems to me -- both to his original hearers and to us today -- is that **he has entrusted us with the treasure of the Gospel**. We can play it safe, and focus on our own needs and security. Or we can be risk takers and share this treasure with the world.

Is it possible to be hurt, to suffer loss, in giving our lives away for others in Jesus' name? You and I both know the answer to that.

But let us risk anyway. For at the end of the day, no act of love done in Jesus' name goes unnoticed. And at the end of time, nothing will sound sweeter in our ears than the words, "Well done, good and faithful servants. Enter into the joy that is set before you."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.