

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church - Annual Meeting

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalms 90:1-8[9-11] 12

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 14“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you

have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 22And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 24Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29For 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. 30As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Talent

Good morning! Let's not beat around the bush... this is just a weird Gospel lesson. It's one of those stories that I remember hearing when I was little, for no other reason than that it just seemed strange. I mean, we have this rich landowner who goes away on a trip for a long time and when he returns three of the servants are to give a reckoning of their activity with his money. The first and second servants double the investments, but the third servant buries the money to protect it. Which doesn't seem like a bad idea given the market these days, but then he accuses the landowner of being greedy and mean, to which the landowner responds by being exactly the type of person the servant said he was, taking the talent away and throwing the guy into the city dump. I imagine the disciples just sitting around looking at each other scratching their heads, wondering what in the world Jesus was saying.

Hopefully, a little background will help us see this parable a little more clearly. First, let's define a talent. It's believed that because of this

parable and its timelessness that talent went from defining a specific monetary value to meaning personal skills or abilities. In the first century a talent was worth a lot of money, like A LOT... In my research scholars listed the worth as that of what a day laborer would get for 15-20 years of work! So the first servant is given the equivalent of more money than they could possibly make in their entire lifetime. Another piece of information that only makes the story even more strange is that it was widely considered that the safest thing to do with your money was to bury it. Think Great Depression mindset here, hiding money in the mattress or walls.

It's also important to ask where the parable falls within the larger story of the gospel. The parable of the talents falls in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. We're nearing the end of the gospel story, Jesus has returned to Jerusalem, and in less than a chapter Jesus will celebrate the Passover with the disciples in an upper room. So, we need to place this story within the context of Jesus' final teachings before he dies. The context for both Jesus and the original audience of the Gospel of Matthew would have been similar; for Jesus it was what to do after he

died, for the writer's audience it would have been what to do now that the *parousia* still hadn't happened. As I mentioned last week, *parousia* is the fancy Greek word that came to mean the second coming of Christ.

It's also important to remember that parables didn't need to be super thought out logical arguments. Bad people could do good things and traditional behavior could be challenged and turned upside down. So where we might sit and scratch our heads, we're led to believe that this was normal behavior for a teacher. As one commentator said, all of this can "*serve to guard the reader from too readily objectifying the meaning presented... and to frustrate our efforts to summarize the way God works into neat coherent systems.*"¹

All of this sort of helps us get a clearer picture of what might be going on, but to get at the meaning of the text you need to realize that it's not about money at all. The church has traditionally used this text to explain the necessity of using your gifts or "talents" for the good of the community.

One commentator points out a wonderful little detail:

¹Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. pp. 336

“For the first time in 25:28-29, the hearer realizes that the vast amount of money originally thought to be entrusted to the servants only to manage has been given to them as their own. Only the third servant continues to regard the money as his master’s (v. 25). With the realization that emerges at v. 28, the whole parable must be understood in terms of grace and the response to it, rather than stewardship of property that remains another’s.”²

We need to remember that this is a kingdom parable, this story picks up directly after what we heard last week, and so the opening of that story also applies to this one. *“The kingdom of heaven will be like this...”* Jesus says at the beginning of Chapter 25. And Kingdom parables are about what God is doing, not about us. So, the focus of the story isn’t what the servant does with the talent but the graciousness that the landowner extends to the servants.

On a basic level this parable is about how we choose to respond to God’s loving grace. We can take the blessings we have received and use

²Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. pp. 336

them to further the kingdom of heaven, or we can complain about the responsibility and bury ourselves in fear.

On another level the story is much more complex. Daniel J. Harrington argues that the parable must be understood within the context of a Jewish movement in the late first century called “formative Judaism.” It boils down to a group that sought to preserve the core of Judaism and the Torah by building a “wall” or “fence” around the tradition.³ Rather than embracing the current activity of God, some people decided to respond by retreating, building walls and trying to protect the age-old “values.”

Sound familiar? There isn't a church in the world that doesn't need to hear that message. And I don't mean just congregations. The story of the church as a whole has been one of fear, disbelief and misunderstanding. Is God really as good as God said? Those promises, will they really be fulfilled? We fail to even perceive the world in the same ways that Jesus calls us to see.

³Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. pp. 354-355

So what do we do with all of that? I think that the first step is to realize that God has indeed given the Church, big C and little c, great gifts or “talents.” We can choose to operate out of fear, believe that we’ll never have enough, that the job is just too big, that Christendom has failed, and that the changes we see are just indications that we need to build higher walls; or, we could choose to act. We can see the changes for exactly what they are, movement on the part of the Holy Spirit, calling each and every one of us to live out the Gospel in our lives for and with one another. As it says in I Peter, *“As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”* So St. Paul’s, what will it be? Amen.