

Sunday: Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: November 15, 2020

Text: Matthew 25:14-30

Title: It's all about Jesus

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

Please pray with me.

This week we continue our march to the end of the church year, with another parable of Jesus about what the kingdom of heaven will look like. In the parable of the ten maidens last week, we explored the oil of faith that sustains the light of our faith and that is also the reserve that keeps us prepared for the return of Christ, even as he is delayed beyond our expectations.

Jesus followed the parable of the virgins with the parable of the talents. It is a familiar parable consisting of three servants and a master. The master is about to go on an extended journey, and he entrusts his property to his servants to use, for his benefit while he is gone.

Two servants use the property to build and grow the master's assets, while one protects it, but does not use it as the master expected.

As we have explored the parables of Jesus these last few months, we have seen how they focus on our God, usually in the person of Jesus. This parable is no different. Last week we noted that the bridegroom was reflective of Jesus whose return to judge the world seems to be delayed, but will come, most likely when we least expect it.

In the parable today, the Master who is going away for an extended journey is reflective of Jesus. The Son of God, who died on the cross for us, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and promised to return, is the one who is on an extended time away from his people in a physical sense. As servants of Christ, we have been given his kingdom to use for his benefit as he grows his church, both militant and triumphant.

The servants in the parable fall into two categories. First, we have the servants who were entrusted with 5 or 2 talents. These individuals put the property to use and doubled what was given to them by their master. The other category of

servant is entrusted with 1 talent. This servant does not use or trade the master's property nor grow it in any way.

As with the parables of Jesus, some of the details are outlandish and make the parable memorable for the hearers. In this parable the "talent" reflects an exorbitant amount of money or property. New Testament scholars value a "talent" at about 6,000 days' wages. That would equate to about 20 years of earnings. This is no small sum for a slave to be entrusted with. As a servant, they would be expected to preserve, protect, and work the assets just as the master would do. While the size of the estate entrusted to each of the servants is memorable, it is not the main point of the parable. There is a much more significant point made by Jesus in this parable.

The emphasis in the parable is the behavior of the two types of slaves. We have the servants who worked the master's money for gain, and the servant who did not. The language used in the first part of the parable points toward a difference between the servants from the beginning. The servant who received 5 talents "immediately went" and the servant who received 2 talents did "likewise." However, the servant who received 1 talent "departed" or "went away." What makes these two types of servants so different? The first part of the parable raises the question but makes no explicit attempt to answer it.

As the story continues, the master goes away and "after much time" returns and calls the servants to give an accounting. It is here that the difference between the two types of servants is revealed. The first servant comes before the master and joyfully returns to the master his original 5 talents and reveals the 5 talents he gained by working the master's assets. The second servant then comes before the master and joyfully returns to him his original 2 talents and reveals to him the 2 talents he gained by working the master's assets.

The master responds to these servants in exactly the same way saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."

As we turn our attention to the accounting of the third slave, it is important to recall that when the talents were distributed, the master gave them to each of his servants "according to his ability." What was entrusted to each servant was something the master knew they could handle. He did not put them into a position where they had no idea of what to do. He did not put onerous expectations on the

servants. He turned his property over to them to work in accordance with his knowledge of their abilities.

The third servant does not joyfully return to the master what was entrusted to him. Instead, he begins with a carefully planned speech.

Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow,
and gathering where you scattered no seed” (25:24)

Nothing in the parable supports the statements of the third servant. From the beginning the master showed utmost respect and care for his servants. He entrusted to them his considerable property. He did not randomly assign amounts of assets to manage but carefully gave to each one “according to his abilities.” The third servant was seen as a valued member of the master’s staff. He was trusted and valued. The master knew he could succeed at the task set before him.

The master replies as if what the slave said was true. The master, assuming as valid what the slave said, exposes the evil heart of the slave pointing out his behavior as a mere excuse. If the slave knew what he claimed to know about the master, he would have at least taken the amount entrusted to him and placed it with the bankers where it would have been safe and secure and earn something in return. He did not even do that much. Rather his fear, or maybe better, his despising of his master is exposed and rejected.

As a result, the master treats the third slave as if he is no longer his servant. The man may no longer share in the master’s possessions, and so he is deprived of the only talent he had. Further he is cast out from the master’s presence. In reality, he has not known the master’s character and he has wronged the master by his actions and by his words.

Hearers of this parable in the first century would react to the words of the third slave as him being insolent and unfair. They know from their own faith experience that their master is not a “strict Lord” who is only concerned for the interest he will earn; he is “friendly,” his “yoke is gentle” (11:29-30), and he saves them as their Immanuel (11:23), when they are about to drown (14:28-31). For them, the slave’s outrageous language shows that he is a hypocrite.

As we look at this parable seeking to discern its meaning, we must recognize that the master is good and gracious, whose authority to call his disciples to faithful service is completely valid.

The slaves represent those who publicly claim the identity of being Jesus' disciples. Jesus is the master who entrusts different amounts "to each according to his own ability" showing wisdom and kindness.

The parable does not ask the question "Have the slaves been faithful enough?" Jesus' depiction of the faithful slaves as opposed to the unfaithful slave provides an exhortation to his hearers past, present and future. The contrast between the two groups is shown in who acted and who did not. The first two slaves did not fear or loathe their master. They knew him rightly and they believed that they were supposed to serve him without fear. The third slave feared and rejected his master, somehow completely ignorant of the master's true character. He refused to serve him in any way.

The parable teaches us that we should not forget who our Master is. And to not forget who we are—the slave of a particular master. Just as Paul identifies himself in Romans 1 saying "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. . ."

Our loving God, our master has entrusted to you and me a life of relationships and opportunities and resources. He calls us to use our lives for him and his will. When he returns, he will treat us the same way that he treats all of his slaves who serve him. He will say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

As servants of Christ our lives are marked by faith in the one who gave his life on the cross for us and for our salvation. We do not live in fear of the judgment of the Master, as he has shown himself to be loving and kind. He blesses us each and every day. He leads us beside still waters. He guides us and protects us.

²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:27-29).

It is not a competition for who does the most. We will not be judged by who was the most devout, who crossed themselves the Lutheran way, or who sang the best. It is not about our feelings about how things are done in society or in the church. We will not be evaluated on whether we, somehow double the treasures entrusted to us. It is not a comparative question at all. Our Lord has entrusted us with faith and gives us the vocation of his beloved children.

To serve faithfully is to keep our eyes on Jesus. This is the doctrine of our church and the message of the Gospel. Jesus who promises to give us rest, whose burden is light, and whose yoke is easy gives to us all that we need. In Baptism we are given faith, in Confession and Absolution we are forgiven of our sins, in Holy communion we are united with Christ by the eating and drinking of his body and blood. Christ continually pours himself out for you and for me in his Word, written and in the flesh. It is for this reason we gather for worship seeking the Gospel of Jesus rightly proclaimed and the Sacraments rightly administered. As we live in faith, we are given opportunities to love our families, church, and neighbors. We share the love of Jesus with others, allowing the treasure of our master to grow in their hearts.

Dr. Jeff Gibbs, one of my professors at the Seminary reflects on this parable this way.

I imagine a conversation like this on the Last Day. One slave approaches the Master and says, “Lord, you entrusted these things to me, and I have gained this much. . . . But there was so much more that I could have done!” The Master replies, “Yes, I am well aware that there was more that you could have done. Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your Master.” A second slave approaches the Master and says, “Lord you entrusted this to me, and I have gained an additional amount. . . . But I was timid too often. I failed to take advantage of all of the opportunities presented to me.” The master replies, “Yes, I recall every detail of all the times when you were a coward. Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your Master.”

The same verdict and divine joy awaits every Christian, not just those who served productively or faithfully enough, whatever that might conceivably mean. In the end—and at the End—it matters only that Christ is my Master who has purchased me and I have been his slave. He entrusted to me things that I was able to work for his glory. If I keep my eyes on the Master, then I will remember to be his slave and to live that way.

Through all of our lives may God guide us to keep our eyes on Jesus and be obedient servants trusting in him for life now and into eternity.

Amen