

SERMON

Year A – Pentecost 25 – Nov. 19, 2023

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“He that had received one” made his having fewer talents than others a pretense for not improving any. Went and hid his master’s money. So mere harmlessness, on which many build their hope of salvation, was the cause of his damnation. Are you doing the same? Are you hiding the talent that God lent you? John Wesley

Quite a Gospel! Over these last few Sundays, Matthew has presented us with a stern, no nonsense view of God. As today marks the next to last Sunday of the church year, we expect such themes to be presented. Traditionally our scripture readings during this period of the church year focus on end times and the return of the Christ. So, we are called to consider the question of our relationship to God. Are we talking the talk but not walking the walk? Have we become complacent in how we conduct our lives; living as if God had nothing to do with our thoughts and therefore has no consideration in our actions? Matthew now challenges us in the waning days of the Church year to responsible and alert living in the awareness that God is not absent and does care about the creation of which we are a part, and that there will come a time of accounting for how we have lived.

The God presented by Matthew over these last few weeks is somewhat different from the kindly, gentle Jesus that I have come to know through my time in Alanon and as an Episcopalian. In today’s selection we are reminded of the Jesus that overturned tables in the temple and who sparred verbally with people who attempted to trip Him up with questions when He was teaching. This is the God I knew from Catholic School in the 1960’s...a demanding by the book God; a “Master” who is a harsh man, who reaps what he did not sow, and gathers where

he did not scatter. A God of Law, not of Love. And certainly not the kind of guy whose expectations you want to have failed to meet. So I expect many of us can identify with the slave who received the one talent and fearful of failure, buried it, thinking safety was preferable to risk.

Matthew has an agenda in presenting these harsher parables. As we are confronted with shorter, darker and colder days as we move into winter, Matthew's Gospels seem to be preparing us for that season. These selections are harsh and replete with apocalyptic language. We are coming to the end of the Church year. Advent starts in 2 weeks. The lectionary selections from Matthew are driving home the point that the end is near. Perhaps providing some context through understanding the cycle of lectionary readings and the audience to whom Matthew is writing can provide us with some insight as to why this parable is presented now and why Matthew frames the story in the manner in which it is presented.

Within the Episcopal Church, our readings come from the Revised Common Lectionary, a table of scripture readings that are appointed for worship. This practice of having specific texts for a specific day dates back to the 4th century. The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) is based on a 3 year cycle of Sunday Eucharistic readings: Year A focuses on the Gospel of Matthew, Year B focuses on Mark and Year C focuses on Luke. The Gospel of John is interspersed through all 3 years of the lectionary. The Sunday readings are chosen to highlight the ministry of Jesus Christ and the story of God's people (<https://lessonplansthatwork.org/revised-common-lectionary/>). Neat and orderly, as Episcopalians like things to be!

Currently, we are finishing Year A and have been reading Matthew. Matthew is writing for a community of Christians composed of a great number of recent converts from Judaism. It is

important to Matthew that fidelity to the law, which is significant in Jewish communities, now be understood in these newly Christian communities, as the law proclaimed and enacted by Jesus. So, as we come to the end of the Church Year where we find many parables dealing with the end of time and the end of reading Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus in this parable trying to prepare His disciples for the long waiting period until His return at the end of time. In Matthew's Gospel, the disciples are reminded of what they have been given and who they serve. Matthew's tone becomes dark and his language is apocalyptic which is in keeping with the analysis that this Gospel more than any of the other synoptic gospels, those written by Mark and Luke, asserts that judgment and damnation are truly options for those who don't translate beliefs into actions

Context helps us understand why we have been hearing dark, apocalyptic readings these last few weeks and Matthew's Gospel seems to have more than his fair share of parables of such a nature. But what is the message that we, the disciples of today, should take away from today's selection?

The parable of the talents raises some serious questions for our consideration. Personally, I find the harshness of the judgment against the third slave, the one given only a single talent really disturbing. The initial take away message may seem that God rewards the rich by making them richer and condemns the poor. Another perspective could be a justification of the prosperity gospel that is so popular with televangelists who ask for donations to purchase personal Lear jets to advance their ministries. For many these interpretations go against all we have come to believe that Jesus taught, lived and calls us to follow.

This interpretation can be revised if we choose to focus on some of the unusual elements in the parable such as the overabundance of gifts of wealth and time. It is significant to our understanding of this parable to know the monetary system of this time. A talent was a vast sum

of money...it would be roughly equivalent to 20 years' worth of wages for an average worker! In this parable, the master, who was leaving on a journey which would take "a long time" entrusts his wealth to his servants, each according to their ability. By this action, the master allows his servants to live a life of superabundance, to sit at a table of plenty.

In the commentaries on the parable of the talents, there is debate regarding who the master represents...is he God or Jesus? It is simpler to see Jesus as the master as he was the one with the disciples and was leaving them with a promise to return. Also the master, who has the overabundance of talents, invites the servants to share in his joy. With this invitation, we can see the continual offer of grace because God is always about love and faithfulness to God's people. Jesus, therefore, can't be a hard slave master who demands unjust practices in order to ensure profits. The parable, then, could really be about the gift of faith rather than judgment, investing or prosperity.

But what about the phrase "the joy of the master?" Perhaps the joy of the master is the joy that comes with the gift of faith; the joy of discipleship which brings trust allowing the disciples to give up everything and follow Jesus. The master is inviting the servants into a life of superabundance, a life of grace and joy. So what is the issue with the third servant? How do we make sense of what the parable says about him? Perhaps that servant can't hear, understand or accept the invitation. And in following that path of rejection of the invitation, he not only buries the talent, but metaphorically himself. He condemns himself to a life without joy because he can't trust what Jesus offers.

If we read this Gospel and hear it as an offer of the gift of faith, then it eliminates all the financial, materialistic and capitalist interpretations that have also been assigned to it. If we hear

this message as an offer into the joy of our master, if we hear it sacramentally, we are invited to a meal where there is simple, good food and enough for all. We are invited into the realm of heaven where calculation does not matter because interest is gained by giving everything away!

In this parable of the talents, we are given a reminder that we are responsible to a returning master and that perhaps we want to actively use our talents rather than bury them. We take this action not for fear of judgment or condemnation but because we want a seat at the table of plenty where all are welcome and you don't have to bring your own chair!

Bringing your own chair is a paraphrase from a statement made by Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress and to run for president. In trying to make leadership gains for women of color in both the Women's Movement and the Democratic Party, Ms. Chisholm remarked, "If they won't give us a seat at the table, bring your own folding chair." Chisholm had faith, put it into action, and got elected to Congress.

Many of us today unconsciously fit Wesley's definition of mere harmlessness. We are good people who come to church weekly and give of our time and treasure. But what about those talents? How do we grow our faith and in the process grow the faith of others?

There are many opportunities here at Trinity to put your faith into action. The Trinity Center for Community provides numerous programs for the larger community. These programs need volunteers to help operate the Saturday Soup Meal, the Pantry Program and starting in December, the Code Blue drop in center when we experience temps of 32 degrees or lower. Contact Derek to help out. His info is in the bulletin. Services here in the church need lectors, ushers, greeters and Eucharistic ministers. Speak with the Vergers if you are interested. In January, we will hold the Annual meeting of the parish. Read the Annual Report to get a better

idea of all the committees that help make Trinity the friendly and dynamic community that we love. Share this love with your family and friends. Invite them to join us at worship or to participate in an upcoming community program held here such as the Art show that occurred on Friday and Saturday.

Put your faith into action! Let's use our talents and work together to continue to build the reign of God!

AMEN!