

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost A 19 November 2023

Matthew 25:14-30

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, inseparably one God, now and forever. Amen.

Today we hear from Jesus' *Parable of the Talents*. If you hear nothing else today, please remember that what God requires of us isn't success, but faithfulness in accepting his grace. Let's pray: ...

The Gospel for today is known as the *Parable of the Talents*. The word "talent" has a double meaning. Its original meaning in New Testament Greek refers to a huge sum of money. In the ancient world, a talent was worth about fifteen years of wages for an ordinary labourer. So, by giving each of his servants one or more talents, the master in this story is entrusting them with a fortune.

The other meaning is derived from one interpretation of this very parable. As the master entrusts his servants with talents, so God entrusts each of us with abilities. In this sense, "talent" means one's ability or skill. We say that someone has a talent for music, sport, writing, art, mathematics and so on.

But the *Parable of the Talents* isn't really about either of these things. The title somewhat obscures the teaching Jesus wants us to hear. The parable is about something far more important than either money or how skilled we are at investing our time, resources, and skills. The *Parable of the Talents* is principally about trusting in God's grace.

The story begins with an act of trust. The master is about to leave town on a journey. He entrusts his wealth to three servants. Each is given a different sum of money. Yet, each is given a huge amount — one talent, two talents, and five talents. The master is gracious to each one and hands over the money without any instructions.

Upon his return, the master calls in his three servants to account for their handling of his money. Two of them doubled the money; whereas, the third returned exactly what he'd been given. It turns out that out of fear of his master, this servant had simply buried the money in the ground - a common security measure in ancient times.

His trust in his master was zero, so he reduced his financial risk to zero, and the possibility of profit to zero also.

So, the story begs a challenging question. How would the master have responded to the first two servants if they'd lost all of his money?

In the context of this parable, I believe the master would have accepted them. Think about it. What is it that the master commends? Not the profits they made, but their faithfulness. He doesn't commend the servant who produced five talents more than the one who produced two. Each receives the same commendation: "Well done, good and faithful servant." Each receives the same invitation: "You have been trustworthy [faithful] over a few things, I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."

And in responding to the third servant, the master makes it clear that he would have accepted even rock-bottom interest from the bank; motivated by faith rather than fear.

It's also notable that the servant who's given five talents makes five talents more, and the one who receives two makes two more. In each case, the doubling seems to suggest that growth is automatic; a function of the talents themselves - much like superannuation. It's not the cleverness of the servants that produces results so much as their willingness to act out of trust.

The central thrust of the parable is about the relationship between the master's grace and the faithfulness of his servants. The master is abundantly gracious toward his servants and entrusts them to use his gifts. Two of the servants return the favour by acting faithfully rather than fearfully, and they come back to their master having doubled his money.

Whereas, the third servant paints his master as a harsh man who demands success. He selfishly maligns his master by falsely characterising him as an ogre and a dishonest man, betraying only his own wickedness, laziness, and lack of faith. For his trouble, he receives exactly what he fears - rejection.

However, the other two servants recognise generosity when they see it. The piles of money thrust into their hands reveals an extremely generous master, who takes a risk, accepts them, and even honours them. Finding themselves at the receiving end of such outrageous altruism, spontaneity, and graciousness, they feel empowered, and are willing to take risks of their own. The love their master has shown them overcomes their fear of failure. They realise that any master who treats his servants so open-handedly is more interested in them than in turning a profit.

This brief vignette about a master and his three servants turns the standards of the world upside down. It announces that the worst thing that can happen to us isn't failure. The worst thing that can happen to us is to lack faith in God's kindness and graciousness to us and make him out to be a grumpy old grouch who rejects us when we fail. We need only turn our faces to the cross to be reminded of the truth that God is love and he generously shares all that he is and all that he has; even the life of his very own Son.

The parable teaches us that the worst thing in life isn't losing out; rather, never taking risks. In the eyes of God, the fear that keeps a treasure buried is an act of infidelity. The freedom that puts that treasure at risk — even though it may result in its loss — that is an act of faith. We can learn from our failures, but fear teaches us nothing.

Jesus' parables confront us with the reality that it's just plain dumb and dangerous not to trust God. There's the contemptible elder brother who refuses to welcome home the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The all-day workers who demand that late arrivals receive less than the daily wage (Matthew 20:1-16). The Pharisee who tries to talk God into accepting him because he's kept the rules, rather than recognising, like the tax-collector, that God is merciful (Luke 18:9-14). These people live in a glum, fearful world, where grace isn't recognised or appreciated and faithlessness is met with its own terrible consequence.

Paradoxically, we understand these people because we too are susceptible to burying our talent out of fear. At times, our imagination conjures up its own ogre idols. We can relate to the third servant because we, at times, can be quick to feel that God is far away from us when things aren't going swimmingly, and we think he is punishing us. We either forget or struggle to believe that through his grace and mercy, he forgives us and loves us unconditionally.

But, what if the true, living, and only God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has no interest in keeping a ledger? What if God's only interest is that we all simply step up to the plate and have a swing? To take risks sharing his Gospel?

[If God is willing to risk it all in calling little Mia through baptism; "promising and bringing her victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts" (BCKW: 461.41), then don't you think he is, at the same time, inviting all of us to take risks with our faith for the sake of propagating his Gospel?]

The Good News of salvation in what Jesus has already done for us on the cross, gives new meaning to success and security. Success is found, not in accumulating more than we can ever use, but in our willingness to take risks in response to God's gracious invitation. Security is found, not in keeping pace with our rising paranoia, but in the utterly reliable God who trusts us before we trust ourselves, who risked everything, and asks that we risk also.

The Parable of the Talents isn't really about money or abilities. They're simply ways of conveying a teaching about trust and taking risks with our faith. It's about our lives. What's important isn't money or abilities in themselves, but our decision to use them in ways that show our willingness to risk and to trust. The central question about life isn't "What did we accomplish?" but whether we learned to obey, whether we learned to love, and whether we were willing to pass it on to others. May we always accept God's grace and mercy, and understand that we have the freedom of the gospel to encourage us to take risks with our faith. It's not how many times we fail that matters, it's whether we have the courage to get up and have a go that counts. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.