

Pentecost 24A November 15 2020
Matthew 25:14-30
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace, peace, and joy to you partygoers from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Let's pray:

Jesus is being thrust headlong towards the greatest collision in creation. Yet, his only concern is to express the joy that's in store for those who believe in him, over and against the absurdity of unfaith. Such is the magnitude of his love for those created in his image.

Last week, we were treated to the happiness of the bridegroom at his wedding, and the joy of the eternal party in heaven for those who simply accept that Jesus' forgiveness is fair dinkum. This week, the Parable of the Talents reveals the joviality of the Lord's joy at throwing his largesse around.

Again, a short summary for those who'd like to take a nap. A man, or master [the master is the Christ-figure of the parable, corresponding to Jesus] goes on a journey [dies on the cross] and then returns after a long time [to appear to his disciples after rising again from death, and also to sit in universal judgement at his second coming]. He calls three of his slaves and gives them substantial amounts of money [faith, a gift of grace, a share in resurrected life]. And he says to them, "Trade with what I have given you until I come to settle the account" [that is, to find out who accepted and who did not accept Jesus' freely given forgiveness by grace through faith]. Snooze time! 3 points.

First, don't be distracted by the results of each servant's faith in this story. Rather, focus on the theme of faith-in-action. Not only does the master of the servants who doubled their talents praise them as being faithful ("Well done, good and trustworthy slave [good and faithful servant]); the doubling seems to be more a function of the talents themselves than the efforts made by the servants.

The servant who was given five makes five more; the servant given two makes two more. I reckon that means the grace of forgiveness does its own work; all we have to do is trust it. God isn't some divine bookkeeper keeping a ledger on our works. The only bookkeeper is the servant who fears a non-existent audit and buries his talent.

God shows this in two ways. First, the master says to the unfaithful servant, "you could've at least chucked it in the bank and earnt some interest", and then he takes the talent away from the hapless servant and gives it to the one who already has ten. Jesus goes to extreme lengths to show that God isn't interested in bottom lines; he just wants us to accept the faith he gives us, and use, rather than hide it. The goodness of God's grace does all that needs doing. The rest of the story is about the ostentatious, unrestrainable, irrepressible joy of the Lord who just wants everyone to enjoy partying with him. Which leads to my second point.

God is a cheerful giver. He throws his money around with reckless abandon. It's the divine party all over again, the party that lurks mischievously, cheekily, playfully, beneath the surface of history. And entry to the eternal bash is only that you recognise him by faith. It's the fatted calf served up for the prodigal son who did nothing but return home in faith (Luke 15:11-32). It's the free champagne and caviar for wedding guests who did nothing but trust the king's insistence on changing into fancy costumes and party hats (Matthew 22:1-14). It's the full pay for next-to-no-work-at-all given to grape pickers who simply said "yes" to a last-minute invitation (Matthew 20:1-16). The only reason judgement comes into it is that there're those who will sadly stare a gift horse in the mouth; those who refuse to trust a good thing when it's handed to them on a platter. Does that weigh heavily on you? It weighs heavily on me because I know that it could just as well be me.

For all that, this is still about joy rather than fear. Advent turns our tears into laughter as we rejoice in anticipation of Christ appearing, because we dare to believe that Jesus wants nothing but the best for us.

The third and last point I want you to embrace is... the absolute needlessness of fear. It's utterly unnecessary to ever dread God. The servant with his shovel and nervousness that God is as small as himself acts out of self-preservation, not faith. We do the same thing when we consider God on the basis of what we think he is like rather than on the basis of who we trust him to be in Jesus.

The third servant is just another example of the characters Jesus parades through his parables to confront us with the irrationality of not believing in him. The elder brother, the man without the wedding garment, the labourers who worked all day – are all cardboard cut-out, cartoon figures in the divine comedy of grace. They're designed to make us tut tut at the foolishness of their behaviour. The twist, equally as comical, is that we most easily identify with those figures.

We spend our lives creating God in the image of our own fears – and the whole time, he's beating us over the head with balloons of grace and foam pool noodles of forgiveness. The history of salvation is slapstick comedy from beginning to end. It's the Three Stooges working only for laughs. God isn't trying to hurt anyone; he's not even mad at anyone. He will never exhaust the length to which he will go to prove there are no restrictions on the joy he wants to share with us. He's already proven his commitment on the Cross of Calvary. If you aren't afraid of Curly, Larry, and Moe, you definitely needn't fear the Holy Trinity.

One last thing. The condemned servant's lack of faith is demonstrated by hiding the talent given to him in a hole in the ground. Jesus isn't an event in history, an idea, a doctrine, or an artefact to dig up. We're not to keep Jesus as a sacramental souvenir because just as the master was present to his servants in and through the talents, Jesus is present to us now and he calls us to faith in him now.

Jesus our Death is with us now; Jesus our Resurrection is with us now; Jesus our Justifying Judge is with us now – if only we believe. Not think; believe,

because when we think we risk concocting an image of God from our worst fears. Not what we rationalise, because drawing logical conclusions from our messed-up assumptions will only make us more fearful still. And not reason; not speculate; not theologise; just trust. Just, “Yes, Jesus. Thank you.”

After that, knock yourselves out. Intellectualise yourselves senseless. After the good servants were faithful, they were free to write PhD theses on economics. But not before. Dear Saints, Christians aren’t in the business of going back in time to find some intellectually creditable character whom we can then decide to trust. That’s a perilous path that gets derailed by the trend of the day, where Jesus becomes little more than a good example, a wise guru, or an ethical authority – none of which by the way, could even save you a seat on a bus, let alone redeem a sinful world.

No, what we’re in the business of is going to Jesus in faith. We take the whole weird Jesus we find in the Scriptures – the One who does all the “wrong” things; the One who associates with all the “wrong” people; the One who “blasphemes” by calling himself God; the One who throws his grace around with reckless abandon and over-the-top abundance. He doesn’t seem to care who he hits with it because he died for everyone. We take the even weirder Jesus we find in the church, who loves us despite all our peculiarities, doubts, and hang-ups. We take the quintessentially weird Jesus now present to us in even the most bizarre of circumstances, and we hang onto him and the salvation we already have, now.

If we believe in this Jesus, we’re doing the only business that we, or the servants in the parable, were ever required to do in the first place: trust the Lord in his grace and let the results be whatever we can manage to make them. Good, bad, or indifferent, we have a ticket to the party, just by believing. Amen.

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