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22nd Sunday after Pentecost

University Presbyterian  
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Psalm 123  
Matthew 25:14-30

I Thessalonians 5:12-24

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the understandings of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

### Truth Telling

Hear today's parable, in modern language:

A president of a large company prepares to leave town,  
to do wheeling and dealing in foreign mega-cities,  
aiming to multiply his power and prestige in the world.  
He calls in his three senior vice-presidents, and gives them instructions:  
“I put you in charge of these large departments of the corporation--  
make my company grow!”

Mr. President is gone for months.  
While he is gone, the first and second vice-presidents do well,  
doubling the growth of each department of the company that they manage.  
But the third vice-president does just the opposite.  
Instead of managing his department for growth,  
he opts for steady maintenance of operations.  
He ensures that all areas under his control continue to produce income,  
but without increasing the size of the total portion.  
He preserves the company's wealth without expanding its risks.

Mr. President finally returns, and calls in his vice-presidents for their evaluations. He hears the reports of the first two, congratulates them, and rewards them with huge bonuses and promotions.

The third vice-president begins his report by telling off the president, accusing him of being dishonest and greedy.

He goes on to report that under his management the department maintained its size without losing any employees and by becoming more energy efficient.

The reaction of the president is swift, sarcastic and vicious.

He calls the third vice-president wicked and lazy, saying,

“So you think I’m greedy? Then you at least should have leveraged the worth of the department with our bankers, and earned interest!”

And so the president takes the department and gives it to the first vice-president.

He fires the third vice-president, without severance pay, and bans his company from giving this former vice-president any good references for future employment.

What’s going on here?

Simply, truth telling.

The third vice-president had the courage to tell the boss off because in the months when the president was away, he realized that the president’s salary was 300 times the wages of the workers and the product sold by the company was of poor quality and the company made its profits through unfair competition.

He saw that by working for this company,  
 he was facilitating great injustice.

He took the opportunity to manage the department under his control very differently,  
 for fair and equitable treatment of employees and customers,  
 not for unsustainable growth.

He took the risk of being fired,  
 for he wanted to bring justice to his work.

Truth telling.

Many have interpreted this parable of the talents quite differently,  
 calling it an exhortation to use your abilities, your personal talents, to good advantage.  
 But such an interpretation ignores many important features of context--  
 of life in first-century Palestine, living under Roman rule.

The modern interpretation I have suggested today is modeled on the interpretation offered  
 by Dr. William R. Herzog, a seminary professor of New Testament.

He begins with the understanding that the term, “talent” used in the text represents an  
 enormous amount of money in Jesus’ day. He also shows that the term “master” was code for the  
 elites of the day, whose wealth was based on stripping land of resources and reducing land-  
 owners to the status of slaves. And the servant/slave was the manager who cooperated with this  
 master in order to gain personal advantage.

Understood in this way, the parable makes sense.

As Dr. Herzog puts it, this is a parable about whistleblowers--  
 those people who put principle before pay,  
 justice ahead of job,  
 truth above convenience.

Those who seek to do truth telling.

This parable comes to us in the lectionary near the end of the season of Pentecost,  
the season when the church renews its commitment to the mission of Jesus.

And what was Jesus' mission?

To proclaim the kingdom of God.

To declare that the kingdom of God is come.

To fulfill the promise of ancient Israel, of God dwelling with us.

And so, as Jesus' disciples, we are expected to embody the kingdom of God  
in our whole lives-- whether at home, at work, at church, or at play.

But this parable warns us:

participating in the kingdom of God will not be easy--  
it will demand your loyalty  
it may cost you everything  
it will bring you immense joy

Are we ready for this truth?

The third vice-president was not commended by his employer.  
He was cast out into outer darkness, left to fend for himself,  
weeping and suffering without help, and alone.  
That is the fate of those who buck the system.

But the story does not end there.

The location of this parable in the text gives us an insight,  
as the last parable before the scene of final judgement.

That final judgement is before the Son of Man, our lord and savior, Jesus Christ.  
As members of the kingdom of God,  
our loyalty is to him, not to our human overseers.

We seek the commendation of our Savior, first and last.

And that is where the role of the whistle-blower brings us joy.

Truth telling brings us great joy, for we can have

no more burden of living a lie  
freedom from the restrictions imposed by the elites  
openness to a new future of authentic hope

We have a responsibility, with this parable of the talents.

Let's not leave the truth tellers out in the dark,

weeping and grinding their teeth.

Rather, seekers of justice and equity and fair play should be able to find refuge

in the kingdom of God.

Therefore, as the church of Jesus Christ,

we should offer support to the truth tellers among us.

Our congregations ought to be safe havens

for those who have the courage to stand up for justice.

Let us support the peacemakers,

who weep over war and the endless marketing of instruments of war.

Let us support the community organizers,

who spend their lives giving voice to the needs and hopes of ordinary citizens.

Let us support any member among us,

who says, I've had enough! this job is killing my spirit!

As the apostle Paul reminds us in the passage today from I Thessalonians,

the community of believers is a community of support

where all are at peace with each other

where the group is in constant prayer for each other

and where the faithful Spirit of God is actively

stirring up mutual caring and thanksgiving.

Let us listen to Paul.

Let us hear the hidden message from Jesus.

Let us support those who have the courage to speak out for justice.

Let us prepare our hearts for truth telling.

Amen.