

November 15th, 2020
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 25:14-30

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, He and His disciples returned to Jerusalem for, what our Lord knew, was the last time. He knew His days were short, that His arrest, torture and execution were just days away and He used this time to prepare His disciples for what was coming. He warned them of the difficulties they would face for following Him and He taught that not all who claimed to follow Him would remain in the faith. Last week's parable on the Ten Virgins was on this topic, that not all who started with faith would remain until the last day. Today's parable is similar, but with a different emphasis.

The Parable of the Talents offers a very concrete picture of what it means to love and serve the Triune God. Three servants are given responsibilities by their master when he is preparing to leave for a long trip. They are each given a sum of money according to their own abilities, which they are to manage wisely on behalf of their master. In other words, they are to act as stewards, caring for something that does not belong to them but which has been entrusted to them. The first servant is given five talents, which does not refer to abilities like juggling or playing the banjo, but was an ancient monetary unit. Originally, a talent was a weight of approximately 75 pounds. But over the centuries it came to mean a specific sum of money. So at the time of Jesus, a talent was over 7,000 denarii, equivalent to 20 years wages for the common worker. So when Jesus said that the first servant was given five talents, that would be approximately 5 million dollars today, a huge sum of money. To the second servant the master gave two talents and to the third he gave one talent, a mere one million dollars. All three of them were entrusted with this money which they were to use for their master's purposes, for his goals.

The first servant went to work right away and worked hard for his master, even though he was not there to encourage or micro-manage him. After a time, he had returned a 100% profit on the money entrusted to him. The second did likewise, earning two talents for the two talents entrusted to him. Both of these servants loved their master and served him with all of their being, putting forth their intellect and physical abilities for the advancement of their master's domain. But the third did not. The master knew he was less capable, which is why he gave him less to begin with. But he was given the same opportunity as the others, to serve the master with time, his intellect, his hard work. But unlike the other two, he started from a position of fear and distrust. He suspected his master of being unfair and a cruel man. He had no desire to serve him because he did not love him. So he took what was entrusted to him, a million dollars by today's standards, dug a hole in the ground and buried it. He left it there, not wanting to risk losing any part of it, because he was more concerned with himself than with his master's will.

The master returned and found that the first two stewards and served him faithfully and diligently, each of them doubling what was given to them. Each of them was praised as being a “good and faithful servant” and rewarded with even more responsibility and authority, not to mention the love of their master. But when the third servant was brought forward to give an account, he produced only the original amount given to him. Picture a man walking in muddy shoes carrying a filthy briefcase with chunks of moist dirt falling from it. He opens it up and says with a shrug “There it is, the same amount you gave me years ago. I don’t think you are a very fair man and I didn’t want to risk upsetting you. I buried the money, so that at least I wouldn’t be charged with losing it.”

The third servant did not lose any money, it is true. But neither did he lose any sleep over those intervening years. Nor did he get a blister or fail to go on vacation or spent time on his hobbies. He did nothing for his master at all, not even bothering to put the money in the bank where at least it would have earned interest. It was as if the master had given the money to a tree or a cow, for all the good it did. In the Army we teach “the Army values” to guide our young soldiers, and one of those values is Integrity. We define it simply as “doing the right thing even when no one is looking.” Through his lack of integrity, the third servant proved that he did not care for his master at all, because he couldn’t be bothered to do the bare minimum, let alone what was expected.

This parable can be misunderstood. Even though the primary symbol used is money, it really isn’t about money any more than last week’s parable was about lamp oil. This parable is about stewardship in the broadest possible sense, which includes all of the things that God entrusts to us, which we are supposed to use not for ourselves but to serve Him. Yes, that does include money, the tithes and offerings that we use to support His Church on earth. But it also includes all of the intangible things we are entrusted with, including our skills and abilities, and – especially – our time. These things are not interchangeable, mind you. You cannot simply substitute one for the other, thinking that because you are too busy to give up your precious time for the church, you can write a bigger check to make up for it. And offering up your professional services doesn’t replace financial support of the congregation. The treasurer cannot pay the electric bill with promises for free labor. All of these things – time, skill, money – constitute the gifts entrusted to us by God and we are to be good and faithful stewards of the wealth that God has given us. After all, they were His to begin with.

The second way in which this parable can be misapplied is in thinking that the first two servants in some way earned their reward through a given amount of effort, a quid pro quo arrangement. But they were given their sums of money freely and they were rewarded equally. The first didn’t receive more because he earned more. The second received the same blessing he did. So this parable should not produce doubt or fear that you have not done enough to warrant salvation. As a preaching of God’s Law, it shows us what God expects of us and how we are to fulfill it. By the working of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to do those things which God requires, out of love, not fear. So for those

who are here in God's house, gathered in worship around the Means of Grace, this parable encourages us to even more acts of service, to continue acting as "good and faithful" servants.

This parable also serves as an answer to those who say they can serve God in their own way. The third servant served his master in his own way, didn't he? He did what he wanted to do, when he wanted to do it. And since he set the bar so low, he met it easily: "Just don't lose any of the money". But that isn't what the master wanted at all. He could have dug the hole himself, if that were the case. Far too many people treat God this way, setting up their own standards, setting their own low goals, and sitting back content that they have done enough to satisfy God. There is no love in this, either for God or their neighbor, whom they are supposed to serve.

This parable is a warning. None of us acts like the good and faithful servant all of the time. That wicked and slothful servant lives within us still. It through God's grace that we are not judged for our moments of weakness. It is through God's grace that we are judged as good and faithful servants, for the sake of the Suffering Servant, Jesus our Lord. He lived out the Law in a way none of us are capable of. It was He who showed us how to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind, in a life wholly given to His Father's will, in a death that He in no way deserved but which served the undeserving. It is because of the victory of Jesus over sin, death and the devil that we have been given the power to act as His servants *should* act. In love, forgiveness and humility. Because we do not have to worry about our guilt and our debts before God, we are free to serve Him with our every breath. We know that when the Master returns we will not be cast in the darkness but will instead be welcomed into His joy.

In Jesus name, amen.

Rev. Schopp