**November 19, 2017**

**Matthew 25:14-30**

This week’s parable is back-to-back with last week’s parable about the 10 bridesmaids. They are similar, unpalatable stories that make us squirm with discomfort and dis-ease. While the parables describe characters who resemble us in their behaviors, the parables also present authorities meant to represent God, but who don’t fit into our preferred image of God. They aren’t likeable characters. They don’t do what we want or expect God to do. How do we reconcile a bridegroom who leaves friends out in the cold, saying that he doesn’t recognize them anymore, with Jesus who went out of his way to include strangers and outsiders in salvation? How do we reconcile a “harsh master” with a loving God? How do we reconcile a God who gives more to those who *already* have, and takes away from those with little, when we remember that Christ already promised the last will be first, the weak will become strong, and the poor will become rich? These two parables -- but particularly today’s -- lie in juxtaposition to the God whom we’ve come to know in Matthew’s Gospel.

Today’s parable is considered one of the most difficult in scripture. There is no consensus amongst 2000 years of believers, theologians, or commentaries. What exactly is God trying to tell us? Is *this* who God really is? Should we discount the other, more loving and compassionate images that we see in the large majority of scripture? Or is this a vision of a God on a bad day – cranky and tired of putting up with our shenanigans? And what does this have to say about us? Should we be saving our talents (as happens in other parables), or should we be investing and earning? Are we judged against others in our community, or on our own merits? What does it all mean, and where does this fit into the context of the rest of the Bible?

Despite the disagreements amongst scholars, many agree that this reading is a reality-check for Jesus’ disciples, and a come-to-Jesus for us. This is the time in Jesus’ ministry when things get real. As he neared his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus became more and more candid with the disciples. His patience wore thin from their continual misunderstandings and misdoings. While the stories at the beginning of the Gospel (and the beginning of his ministry) were couched in lovely metaphors and gentle invitations, in these last days, the stories became demanding and somewhat scary. Even “weeping and gnashing of teeth” today… Jesus pointedly reminded them that their merry band was not just fun and games. There were real consequences for their work. He was running out of time with them. They were running out of time with him. They needed to straighten up and get it right.

And that invitation is passed to us. Instead of casually listening to the stories as we often do, instead of reading scripture when we feel like it, reading only the “feel good” parts, and casually practicing our faith, we must snap out of our stupor and make things right with God. We don’t have all the time in the world. We have today. We have now. And we need to respond to God’s call to us.

Amidst all of Christ’s talk about grace and forgiveness, we rest on our laurels, thinking that it doesn’t matter what we do. We lift high the cross and proclaim Christ’s victory, then sink back into our spiritual fog. Consider our sinfulness? Nah, we’ll wait until Lent. Consider inviting someone to church? Nah, we’ll let the *other* Christians do that. Consider feeding the hungry? Nah, we’re too busy today. We’ll get to that next week. There are plenty of passages in scripture (and plenty of days in the year) when it is easy to let ourselves off the hook from responsibility. But not here. It is clear from reading these two parables that God cares about what we do. It matters how we live in the kingdom. These two parables demand a response from us.

“To all those who have, more will be given…” And since in salvation, God has heaped grace upon grace upon grace upon us, it seems that God has a right to expect more out of us. God called us not to hide our light under a bushel, and yet we do, out of laziness or busy-ness or our inability to believe and trust in our own gifts. We often don’t do anything with what God gives us because we don’t believe that we have much to offer. We look to others to do it better, when instead, it’s our gifts that our needed.

This is not an unusual problem amongst the followers of God. Moses thought that he couldn’t serve God because of a speech impediment. The prophet Jeremiah thought that he was too young. Jesus’ mother, Mary, thought that she was too young and perhaps too poor. But the prophet Jonah really took the cake when he failed to use the gifts God gave him. Jonah doubted that he was the right person to go to Nineveh. He thought that God should get someone else to do the job, but it turned out (through that messy fish tale) that God only wanted Jonah. God gave him the specific tools to do that specific work.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility.” Or, said in another way, “the sin of privileged people is running from responsibility.” It is a privilege to choose to follow or not. It is a privilege to choose to feed or not. It is a privilege to choose to give or not. We run from responsibility hoping that anyone else will make the sacrifice, be the martyr, inconvenience themselves, and change their own lives. For ourselves, we would prefer to maintain our *status quo*.

A few months ago, I drove past a woman in a parking lot. She was well dressed, and both arms were full of shopping bags. At first glance she appeared to be waiting for a ride – perhaps a friend or a bus. But she was strangely standing out in the road – just a bit, instead of on the curb as one might expect. I was busy and had the baby in the car and didn’t think much about her. I already started to swerve to go around her, when she started waving her arms. It surprised me, but I was already past her, so I watched in the rearview mirror as she walked farther out into the road, now waving her purse and her shopping bags and everything that she had with her. She obviously needed something. But I was busy and had the baby, and saw a line of other cars behind me, all swerving into the middle of the road to avoid her. It would have been difficult to pull over. It would have caused trouble for traffic. It would have delayed everyone... No one stopped to help her. Not one of us. I worried about her – even in that moment – I wondered about her. But I didn’t stop. I didn’t turn around. And I still regret it. Surely there was something I could have done to help, at the least, call someone else. But I was busy and had the baby and there were others who could have stopped… I wasn’t willing to take myself off track that day. I didn’t want to make the sacrifice or be the martyr. As Bonhoeffer said, “The sin of respectable people is running from responsibility.”

There is work that God needs us to do – in our souls, in our families, here at Sweet Hollow, and in the life of the world. Who will do it, if not you? We can’t wait for our politicians to solve the global refugee crisis; God needs us to be involved now. We can’t wait for someone else to volunteer with our youth group; our teenagers need us to love them and lead them now. We can’t wait another day to begin reading scripture at home; God needs our hearts and minds today. Time is of the essence! Each moment that we delay, we lose potential interest. By not feeding for the hungry today, someone misses another meal. By not caring for our youth today, church becomes irrelevant to them. By not spending time with God in prayer each day, we become less of a friend and more of an acquaintance.

While God’s gifts are freely given to us, it is our responsibility to use them. It does no good to be Jonah and run the other way. It does no good to have tools in your toolbox, but never fix anything in your house. And since God has given us the gift of salvation, we are tasked with using it. Investing it. Growing God’s salvation bigger than ourselves. How tragic if we let God’s gifts sit on the shelf in our souls, collecting dust, and waiting for rainy days that have already come and gone.

Salvation is just one of many glorious gifts that God gives us. Some are given the gift of teaching, while others are given the gift of mercy. Some are called to wisdom, while others are called to generosity. Then there’s music and friendship and creativity and more and more… What are the gifts that God has given you, and how are you using them? What are you doing with God’s talents? What more can you do to increase God’s investment? In these next moments, find a pencil and jot down some of the talents (or gifts) that God has given you. Then take one of those gifts and think about how you can better use it. How can you make a better return on God’s initial investment in you? I want you to make an action plan for this week. ... (wait a few minutes)

This is how we practice stewardship. “for to those who have, more will be given.” Thanks be to God. Amen.