

Sunday, November 19, 2023
25th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28A

Matthew 25.14-30

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/659874482997672>

(Sermon begins at about 24:35)

“Entering into the Joy of Our Master”

Today’s parable is really meant to be an extension of last week’s—the parable of the ten bridesmaids. A story to provide further explanation of what was just conveyed. As you will recall, the message of that parable is contained in Jesus’ final statement: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt 25.13). As I discussed in my sermon last week, there is more to the parable than just the warning to keep awake as the bridesmaids await the coming of the bridegroom—as we await the coming of the Messiah. That parable is also about what the bridesmaids are to do while they wait for the bridegroom. About what we are to do while we await the coming of the Messiah. But then, we need a little more direction as to what that looks like. Enter today’s Gospel lesson.

Today’s lesson is the parable of the talents. In short, a wealthy man, before going on an extended trip, entrusts his assets to his servants. To one is entrusted five talents; to another, two talents, and to yet another, one talent. Presumably apportioned in accordance with their abilities. Or their potential for success. When we hear the term talent, we think of the modern meaning: a special, natural ability possessed by an individual. And we would ultimately be right. Our word and understanding of “talent” is derived from the ancient talent Jesus was referring to. But in Jesus’ time, a talent was not an individual’s ability, but a sum of money. An astronomical sum of money, equivalent to 15 to 20 years wages for the average worker. So, in our terms, one talent would be worth somewhere in the neighborhood of a million dollars. And over time, that term came to mean something of great value.

As we heard in the parable, two of the servants—the ones entrusted with five and two talents—were daring and courageous in their management of the funds given them. They each invest their respective sums of money. Admittedly, they were taking a risk in investing what belonged to their master. One who, by all accounts, was shrewd in business and could be pretty harsh. But their daring paid off. They each doubled their investment. The unwritten implication being that more was involved than just putting the money in the bank and allowing it to accrue interest. That kind of return on their investments would only have been due to some hard work on the parts of the servants.

The servant who was entrusted with the one talent was not as daring as his comrades. In fact, he was downright fearful. Fearful of what might happen. So instead of taking a risk and investing the money, he buried it in the ground where it did absolutely no good. While he may have thought he was playing it safe, this was the worst possible thing he could have done. As his master noted upon his return, at the very least, he could have deposited it in the bank and

earned a little interest. That would have certainly been better than nothing. And we might have an idea as to why the master only entrusted him with one talent to begin with.

The first two servants were operating out of faith in their abilities. They were operating out of a perspective of abundance. That anything is possible, if they applied themselves. They knew they had what it takes, they knew they had the talents (in our understanding of the term) to produce results. The third servant? Not so much. He operated out of fear. Out of a perspective of scarcity. Best not risk anything for fear of losing it all and ending up with nothing. Which, sadly, is exactly what happened. He ended up with absolutely nothing, because he was not willing to risk. He was not willing to apply himself. And perhaps most tragic, because he did not have faith in himself and in his abilities.

Upon his return, the master is pleased to see what the first two servants have accomplished. How they have acted courageously and their daring has paid off to his benefit and, in return, to theirs, as well. As a reward, he invites them to “enter into the joy of your master.” Implying that more rewards await them in the future. But things do not go well for the servant who simply buried his talent. If he was not going to even try to do anything with what he had been given, there was no point in keeping him around. The master did not need servants who are not willing to put in the effort.

Now there might be a temptation—and there certainly is in some quarters—to view the theme of today’s parable as a prosperity gospel message. That if you just have enough faith, if you are devoted enough to the church and its ministries, God will reward you with wealth. Yes, that is a thing in some forms of Christianity, but not in ours. So no, this passage is not about that. While it uses a financial metaphor, it is not about our own financial prowess. After all, the servants in the parable were charged with—and in the case of the first two, did—increase their master’s wealth, not their own. The monetary imagery is only used as a literary device. Jesus clearly intends money to be a figure for “value.” One’s own value and worth. Talents in the ancient sense representing talents in our modern sense. It is really a message about how we choose to use the talents given us by our Master—by God. Or, in other terms, recognizing that what we have is entrusted to us by God and we are merely stewards of those gifts.

It is important to remember that this parable was told to the disciples mere days before Jesus’ death. This was part of his final instructions to them. In this context, and in light of this being a lesson in what we do while we await the coming of the Messiah, this parable is meant to be a model for how we are to live our lives of faith until his return. A model for how we are to engage in and continue his work and ministry until his return. Just as the servants in the parable were left to carry on the work of their master until his return.

The overall point of Jesus’ parable is to help us envision and to live into a more creative way of life—one that boldly embraces the gifts and talents God has given us, and to be daring and courageous in what we do with those talents, what we do with our lives. Particularly as a follow-on to the parable of the bridesmaids and its lesson of how we are to await the coming of the Messiah, the parable of the talents urges us to avoid squandering those talents our Lord has given us. To not be foolish, to not become complacent with how things are going. We are urged

to be active in our waiting, and to use our God-given gifts and talents to help move us one step closer to the fulfillment of the kingdom of God.

This parable is a clear message from Jesus to his disciples and to us that, until he comes again, there is still work to be done. The work that Jesus was doing before his death, continues. There are still homeless people in need of shelter. There are still hungry people in need of being fed. There are still sick and infirmed people, widows and orphans, in need of care. There are still swords needing to be beaten into plowshares. There are still wrongs to be righted. There are still the lowly to be lifted up. There are still tears to be dried. Jesus calls us as his Body in the world to continue with this work. In today's parable, he invites us to use our unique talents in that sacred work. The kingdom of heaven is not on hold until Jesus returns. It continues to break into the world and to expand. And the primary way that occurs is through the creative, daring, and courageous actions of God's people who are not afraid to roll up their sleeves and use their talents. To use the talents God has given them in service to God and his purposes.

This lesson—this invitation—applies not just to individuals, but to communities, as well. It is not only about what I can do, what you can do, by way of ministry to continue and extend Christ's work in the world. It is also about what we can collectively do as a community of faith. Particularly when we can bring together people with a variety of complimentary talents, working together to achieve more than any of us could on our own. Particularly when we get creative in the use of our collective talents, and have the courage to act boldly on our convictions to truly be the Body of Christ in a world so in need of God's love.

Today we officially wrap-up our annual stewardship campaign. For the last seven weeks we have heard some of our siblings in Christ talk about what St. Gregory's means to them. Many of those have talked, directly or indirectly, about how this place has allowed them to use their talents. In some cases, how this place has helped them to discover talents. In all cases, the response is the desire to give back, to support the ministries of this place. Invariably, with each stewardship reflection, we have seen some permutation of the parable of the talents. How life and ministry in this place has nurtured, blessed, and enriched the lives of our parishioners. And how their faith and what they do here has nurtured, blessed, and enriched our parish as a whole.

Stewardship of our gifts and talents, of our time, of our resources, is not just something that happens from the beginning of October to mid-November. It is an ongoing way of life for those of us who await the return of our Messiah. That, while we wait, we continue to find ways in which we can use our talents and resources for the benefit of our parish, our community, and to continually further God's ever-growing kingdom. In so doing we, too, are invited to enter into the joy of our Master.