Sunday, November 15, 2026
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28A)
Matthew 25.14-30
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

"Enter Into the Joy of Your Master"

One of the interesting things about the Bible, and particularly about parables, is that they can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways. More often than not, there are multiple layers of meaning. There are the actual words on the page—the factual, historical account of what is being conveyed. But sometimes there are deeper layers of meaning that have to be teased out. There may be specific religious or cultural contexts which may not be readily apparent to us today. Requiring first an interpretation of what the passage meant in its original telling and then attempting to translate into our modern context. Or the reading may be more allegorical, more of a stylized representation of something else altogether. Using one set of images to explain something else. These are just a few of the more common layers or interpretations potentially hidden within any given passage. In short, sometimes a passage is completely transparent—what is presented tells the whole story. And other times, there may be additional layers of meaning waiting to be discovered. The challenge—and the fun part—of preaching, at least for me, is digging into such stories and trying excavate the various levels. To uncover the potential meanings. Sort of a metaphorical archaeological expedition.

Today's parable of the talents is one such story. On the surface, it is a story of a wealthy man who goes on a journey, entrusting his estate to his slaves. But we know right off the bat that it is a fictitious story told to make a specific point. Jesus tells us as much. He starts off with "It is as if . . ." What is the "it" he is referring to? The "it" that he is trying to describe? The current passage follows on the heels of another parable—the parable of the ten bridesmaids we heard last week—which he introduced by saying "The kingdom of heaven will be like this" (Mt 25.1). It is logical to assume that this parable is yet another illustration of what the kingdom of heaven will be like.

Well, sort of. Again, this immediately follows the parable of the ten bridesmaids, which ends with the words "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Mt 25.13). So maybe he is not talking so much about what the kingdom of heaven is like, but more about how we are to await the coming of the kingdom of heaven. On the eve of his arrest, Jesus is giving his disciples final instructions for what they are to do following his death, resurrection, and ascension. And even more so, what they are to do until his Second Coming when the kingdom of heaven will be brought to fulfillment. Given the fact that the parable is about a landowner who is going away for a time, entrusting his estate to his slaves until his return, the landowner clearly represents the Messiah whose return the disciples await. While Jesus is talking to his disciples about what they are to do while they await his return, the instructions apply equally to us. To those who, 2,000 years later, continue to await his return. Last week, we were told that we are to "Keep awake therefore, for [we] know neither the day nor the hour" (Mt 25.13). But what are we to do while we attempt to keep awake, attentive, and vigilant? Today's parable provides one answer to that question.

On one level, today's parable is about stewardship—how are we to care for the resources entrusted to us by our master until his return? More specifically, how are we to manage and continue the mission and ministry of God's kingdom while we await Christ's Second Coming? In the parable, that mission and ministry are represented by the talents the landowner entrusts to his slaves. Just a word of clarification about what is meant by "talent," as it ultimately really does have dual meaning. In the context of the parable, a talent is not what we think of as a talent: that being a natural ability. It is clear from the story that a talent is a unit of money. In Jesus' time, a talent was roughly equivalent to 15 to 20 years of wages for the average worker. Calculation in today's terms are dicey, because it all depends on how you define an "average wage" and how you define an "average worker." But in round terms, one talent would be worth around one million dollars today. You can do the math with respect to the parable. That said, the English word, "talent," meaning "a special natural ability," actually does derive in part from "talent," the ancient monetary unit, in the sense that both represent a valuable gift. The English term deriving from an interpretation of this parable, sometime in the 13th century.[1]

But even when it comes to "stewardship," there are multiple layers. The obvious one is as conveyed in the parable itself. The first two slaves—the ones entrusted with five and two talents, respectively—invested what was entrusted to them, doubling their investments. The counterpoint to their wise stewardship of their master's resources is the third slave, who is so fearful of his master, who is known to be "a harsh man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] did not scatter seed," that he buries the one talent entrusted to him in the ground for safe keeping. As we heard, when the landowner returns, he praises the first two for their business acumen. And it certainly did not hurt that they doubled his money. But the third, he chastises then punishes for being worthless and not even putting in a minimum of effort to try to do something with the one talent. Even if it was only putting it in the bank to earn a paltry amount of interest. At least that would have been better than nothing. Which is what the slave did. Nothing. And what he got in return. Nothing. Ultimately, worse than nothing.

The primary meaning of the parable being the value of being busy and industrious, working for the growth of God's kingdom while we await Christ's return, as opposed to being lazy and sitting around and twiddling our thumbs. This highlights Jesus' desire that, as his followers, we are to buy into and invest ourselves in God's kingdom as opposed to passively waiting for him to return and do all the work. Or, to use the language of "talents," we are to use our own gifts and talents to help build the kingdom of God. We are to use the gifts God has entrusted to us to help expand his kingdom. After all, when we invest in God's kingdom and do our part to support the mission and ministry of the Church, of God's kingdom, it continues to grow and expand. When we sit around and do nothing, at best it stays the same, stagnates. And more realistically, it withers over time. Then what is there to be of the Church, of God's kingdom here and now, when Christ does return?

Work to keep things going or just slack off? Work to help build God's kingdom or let it just stagnate? As followers of Jesus, one would think this is pretty much a no-brainer. That is the very definition of the mission and ministry of the Church. Otherwise, we would not be here. Particularly after waiting for 2,000 years. Which indicates there really is something deeper still behind Jesus' parable and actions of the third slave compared to the other two. That being

stewardship of our selves, of how we choose to apply our own talents to the work of the kingdom. Or not.

As presented in the parable, this boils down to fear vs. courage. The emphasis in the parable being on fear. The third slave said so himself: "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man . . . so I was afraid." Yes, he was afraid of his master. But even more so, he was afraid of himself, in a sense. He lacked confidence in his own abilities. He was afraid of failure. Which fed into his fear. Perpetuated and strengthened his fear. To the point of inaction. We even have a term for that: "paralyzed by fear." And, in a way, perhaps the landowner recognized the potential for fear—and the inaction that could result—when he divided his resources: "To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability." Not only did the fearful slave do a disservice to his master, he did a disservice to himself. He was so afraid of losing the one talent that had been entrusted to him that he never even gave himself the opportunity to do anything with it. Out of fear, he never gave himself the opportunity to see what he was capable of. Perhaps further fulfilling the landowner's initial assessment.

This fear is further accentuated by the approach of the other two slaves. The first two slaves were enthusiastic, energized, and willing to act courageously, to act boldly. They were willing to explore opportunities, to see what they might be capable of. "The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded them." He went off at once. He did not hesitate. And we are told the one with two talents acted "in the same way." Both were willing to invest their talents. And given what is required to double one's investment, they surely knew the risks involved. They could have just as easily lost it all. But they were willing to act boldly on behalf of their master. And on behalf of their own interests. Even without knowing they might benefit with additional wealth, at the very least they would have gained the satisfaction of learning just what they could accomplish given the chance. Not to mention that success, and maybe even failure following a bold and valiant attempt, would garner the "joy of [their] master."

The first two slaves were greatly rewarded for their boldness. To each the landowner proclaims, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Meanwhile, the third slave is punished for his perceived laziness and wickedness—is punished for his fear—by being thrown "into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." He failed to act because of fear. Yet, in failing to act, his fears were not averted. Rather, his fears were realized. In other words, he is cut off from the joy of his master. And from the joy of community with his fellow slaves. That was the real "outer darkness, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth." The torture he must have put himself through because of lack of faith in himself, because of the fears that prevented him from living up to his potential, because of the way he destroyed his master's faith in him.

Is Jesus saying that when it comes to waiting for the kingdom of heaven, those who fear are to be cut off? Of course not! That is not how Jesus operates. Those who are fearful are not excluded by Jesus. But what he is saying is that those who live in fear, those who operate out of fear and do not engage in the work of the community of faith potentially exclude themselves from the satisfaction of working for something greater than themselves. As such, they are excluding themselves from the joy of their master.

While the landowner in the parable is meant to represent Jesus, there is a significant difference between the two. We are told the landowner is harsh and demanding. Jesus, our master, is the polar opposite. He is gentle and compassionate. The parable is not meant to scare us. Rather, it is his warning and assurance to us that while waiting for the coming of the kingdom of heaven, we need not fear. Quite the opposite. We are to act boldly, in our ongoing work of maintaining and expanding the mission and ministry of God's kingdom. Knowing that it can be risky work. Recognizing that even in risking we often learn something valuable about ourselves, allowing us to grow more fully into who God has created us to be. And knowing that, no matter what happens, when we have been faithful and done our best on behalf of our master, he is always willing to invite us: "enter into the joy of your master."

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talent_(measurement)