

PENTECOST XXII PROPER 25

ST. CHRISTOPHER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NOVEMBER 16, 2014 THE REV. MAURICE L. GOLDSMITH

MT. 25:14-30

“So take the one talent from him,” the Master said, “and give it to the one with the ten talents.

For to all those who have, more will be given and they will have an abundance, but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.”

And you thought the Foolish Virgins got a raw deal last Sunday!

All they missed was a party.

This poor guy gets thrown into the obviously unpleasant outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This surely is one of our Lord's most puzzling – most disturbing - parables.

It has given rise to all sorts of misunderstandings and harmful nonsense.

For example, the hellfire and brimstone, backwoods, deepwater Baptist preacher in Chumuckla who one morning was haranguing his flock about the horrors of hell.

(I apologize to our Baptist brothers and sisters for this caricature. I tried using a rabbi, but it just doesn't work.)

“And I tell you, brothers and sisters, in that dark and awful place there will be a'weeping and a'wailing and g-nashing of teeth.”

At which a little old lady in the back row stands up and shouts,

“But, Preacher, I ain't got no teeth!”

“Oh, Sister,” he shot back, “Don't you worry. Teeth will be provided!”

Well, maybe so.

But the focus of Jesus' teaching is less about outer darkness than about the Kingdom of Heaven as he tells us at the beginning of the parable.

“Jesus said, ‘The Kingdom of heaven will be as when a man, going on a journey summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them.

To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he (the Master) went away.’”

Jesus is that man who is going on a journey – the most amazing, most important journey since the beginning of creation.

He has told his followers about it time and again.

Jesus has told them that he is leaving for a while, and how they must act, what they must do while he is away.

So this is a continuation of that instruction to them, and they would have heard it as such.

They would have understood that Jesus is their Master, That they are his servants or slaves,

And that the treasure that he entrusts to them is the inestimable riches of their lives in the Kingdom of Heaven.

It would not have been lost on them that Jesus recognizes their individual gifts, and expects them to perform to the best of their God-given abilities – nothing more – nothing less.

They are to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, and to work tirelessly for the coming of the Kingdom.

Jesus promises them again that he will return, and that when he does, there will be an accounting – a job performance review – a judgment of their ministries – their lives.

Some will be promoted and some might be fired – pun intended.

And finally, that those who have been faithful with this relative little will enter into the joys of a continuing, eternal relationship with Jesus in his Father’s Kingdom.

As pure Bible study, we could leave it at that – leave it there with Jesus and his disciples.

But if we were to do that, its importance for us would be minimal.

And so we have to ask the questions,

Why did Matthew record this story?

Why did the early Church choose to preserve it?

Why do we need to hear it today?

Part of the answer is one of the thorniest problems of Christian history and theology.

It is called the Delayed Parousia. (par-oo-see-ah)

Parousia is a Greek word that means “a physical presence or arrival,” often referring to an official visit – a royal progress.

In this parable and in so many other teaching and conversations, Jesus promises that after his resurrection, he will return to earth in glory, and will bring his Father’s Kingdom with him.

And that some of his disciples will still be alive when that happens.

That is certainly what they believed, and what Paul believed and taught.

The persecuted, fragile infant church believed that promise and was sustained by it.

Of course the problem is that it did not happen.

It did not happen!

Jesus did not return with his army of angels, setting all things to rights, rewarding the “good and faithful slaves” and punishing the “wicked and lazy slaves.”

At least not in the way that most of them expected,

that most of them hoped.

Some Christians, then and to this day, believe that Jesus did return –

That he did return at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And certainly there is something to that, and thank God for it.

Others believe that Jesus was referring to his Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, where he is really present with his followers.

And certainly there is something to that as well, and thank God for it.

For many Christians that is enough, or at least almost enough.

It is enough for me sometimes, much of the time.

But in my heart of hearts, especially when the going gets rough,

I want Jesus here and I want the Kingdom and my part in it, and I want it now, just as the disciples and Paul and the early Church believed.

I am guessing that you do too.

We long for our Lord here and now.

That is much of the season of Advent – for which our lessons are preparing us these last few weeks.

Advent-longing for the promised Parousia –

the physical arrival of the royal personage of Jesus the Christ.

And that is why Matthew and the early Church preserved this parable.

To reassure us of Jesus' return.

That the Parousia has happened and that it will happen –

Just as Jesus promised.

That he and his promises can be trusted.

And to teach us how the Church – we - are to act in the meantime.

Are you with me so far?

I hope this helps us understand why Jesus told this story,

and why the Church thought it important to put it in the Bible.

And that leads us to the final question,

Why do you and I need to hear it today?

Let me suggest a couple of answers.

First we need to hear it because always and forever need to be told the Good News that God loves us more than we could ask or imagine.

And this story is full of that love.

Now I know what you are thinking.

“The one talent man did not receive a lot of love, did he?”

And you are absolutely right.

He did not receive any love at all, and what a shame that is.

What a tragedy.

But that is not to say that the Master did not give him love.

The Master loved him enormously and trusted him greatly.

The talent that the Master left with him was a measure of silver,  
which at that time equaled a lifetime of wages.

And so what the Master gave him from his love was the man’s life –

To live it and to make of it what he could.

So, yes indeed, the Master’s love was there, start to finish.

But the man could not – did not – receive that love

Because he did not trust or love the Master.

“I knew that you were a harsh man,” he says, adding insult to injury.

“And I was afraid.”

I was afraid!

And that is what happens, is it not, when we do not love and do not trust.

We act out of fear and we hide our life in a hole in the ground.

Where did this poor, frightened shell of a man get this image of the Master,  
so different from that of his peers who respond out of love and out of gratitude?

Maybe he heard it from that preacher from Chumuckla, or people like him?

Not from Jesus.

What would have happened to those two risk-taking slaves –

5 Talent and 2 Talent –

if they had come to their Master empty-handed saying,

“So sorry. Forgive me. I did the best I could, but it did not work out.”

Well, Jesus tells us about a loving, undignified Father who runs down the road, his beard and robe flapping in the breeze, to embrace his returning failure of a prodigal Son.

Jesus’ life shows us a loving Father who raises his crucified, broken worldly failure of a Son to his right hand in glory.

That sounds to me like a forgiving Father whose unending love overcomes our fear and enables us children to trust, and to take risks with the gift of the life we have been given - given in trust.

It is not failure, but faithlessness and fear that prevent us from trusting our lives to Jesus, and receiving his Father’s abundant love.

And that brings me to the other second half of my answer of why we need to hear this story today.

This parable is quite simply a stewardship sermon and a good one.

(It is Jesus preaching it, after all.)

It is a true and grace-filled stewardship sermon, not about the money, but about how we live our lives.

Much of this section of Matthew – and in fact nearly half of all of our Lord’s parables – are about true stewardship.

As Mother Jessica helpfully pointed out to us last Sunday, Matthew’s Gospel is a bit heavy on judgment, true enough.

But it is usually self-judgment.

We judge ourselves unworthy and judge our Lord untrustworthy.

And from there it is a downward spiral – for each of us and for our parishes as well.

Jesus promises us that he has made us worthy.

We can choose not to believe him and to spend our lives in the outer darkness if we want that.

I have done so in the past, and perhaps you have as well.

It is indeed a place of wailing and gnashing of teeth – and I had a full set.

And I have lived much of my life since then trying to make sure I do not return, for it is Hell – pure and simple.

What stopped my downward spiral was the grace of friends and, of all things, the Episcopal Church and one of its priests.

And what helped and continues to help me gain a little altitude is an intentional life of Stewardship –

A somewhat selfish life of giving so that I can receive an ever-increasing abundance of God's grace and love.

That is the promise and that is the truth.

I want to tell you more of that story another time.

For now let me remind you that today is Stewardship Sunday.

And I will say a bit more about that at the announcements.

More than 160 of you have already made your faithful pledge to Christ through his parish of St. Christopher's.

Made our pledges of Time and Talent on one side of the card, and Treasure on the other.

Thank you and bless you.

Today 22 of you make yourself open to a stewardship call to serve the Master as Vestry members and Convention Delegates.

Thank you and bless you.

Many, many of you have faithfully given and served over the years.

Thank you and bless you.

Some of you are just beginning a stewardship life.

Thank you and bless you.

A few of you need the rest of us to encourage you and assure you that the promises of Christ can be trusted, and that your life will be infinitely enriched when you take the risk of being what we were created to be – Good Stewards and our Master’s greatly loved servants.

The choice is ours. Always. Daily. Forever.

We can choose to live abundant lives of love and faith in the Master’s joy.

Or we can choose to live tiny lives of fear and regret in the Outer Darkness.

Where teeth will be provided.