

November 15, 2020  
The 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Lectionary 33, Year A  
Matthew 25:14-30  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Zoom Worship during the Covid-19 Pandemic  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### It Matters

It matters. It matters what you do and why you do it.

Ultimately, that's what today's gospel reading is about. It's a parable, which is a made-up story that Jesus tells to make a point. In his ministry Jesus told many, many parables, all of which were ripped from the headlines of the lives of the people that he was talking to. Some of them weren't especially exciting headlines, but they were things that the people who heard them could understand:

*Woman finds coin, then throws a party*

*Farmer scatters seed, before making much of a plan about where he would scatter it.*

*Man finds treasure in a field, sells all that he has, and buys field*

*Birds make nests in the branches of a mustard tree*

*Landowner pays workers equally for different hours of work*

*Some exalt his generosity; some complain that they've been treated unfairly*

*Bridegroom delayed, lack of oil in some of the bridesmaids' lamps causes them to miss the reception*

Some of these parables are feel familiar to us because we've heard them over and over again through the years. We might have learned about them in Sunday School, we might have read about them in some devotional booklet, we might have heard sermons on them, so that their very familiarity dulls our hearing of them.

We might hear them and think, “Oh, this is one of my favorite stories that Jesus told.” We might hear them and think, “I never understood that one” or even, “I never liked that one.”

Some of them, for us, might seem like stories that don’t make much sense or that they don’t have much to do with life the way we experience it. But for the first hearers and later the first readers, Jesus’ parables might have felt like they were describing their daily lives and the world around them; some of the crazy things that their neighbors did or some things that they themselves had experienced. More often than not, though, the stories that Jesus told started with life as they might have known it, but then took a twist or a turn that made them laugh or wonder or think, what if life were really that way.

Today’s gospel reading, today’s story that Jesus told, isn’t really one to make us laugh. I doubt too many people hear it and think, “Oh, that’s one of my favorite parables.” But maybe we’re supposed to hear it and think not, “I have no idea what Jesus is talking about” but instead, “I wonder how this story could help me live out my faith in meaningful ways.”

Here’s the story. A man entrusted large amounts of his money to three people in his charge. He gave them what our text calls talents. When we hear the word “talents” we think of some kind of skill or ability that a person has, like a talent for crocheting a beautiful doll or a talent for singing or a talent for gardening or a talent for creating artwork or a talent for dancing. That is not what is meant by talents in this reading. In the Greco-Roman world, a talent was a measure of money, in fact a talent was equal to about 30 pounds of gold, which would be worth about \$530,601.60 in today’s money. Another way of looking at it is that is that one talent would have been worth about 20 years of labor in the time of Jesus, which, given the average lifespans of that time, would have been about a person’s entire working life. The point is that all three of the men who were entrusted with the man’s wealth were entrusted with a huge, even overwhelming amount of money.

The three men weren't given equal amounts of money to work with. One man was given five talents, well over two million dollars in today's money. The second was given two talents, over a million dollars, and the third man was given one talent, which was still a large and generous amount of money. The text says that the difference between what each man received was based on his ability. The man was not asking his three servants to take on more than they were capable of. He knew them, he knew their skills and abilities and gave them what he thought they could manage.

Then he went away and two of the talent recipients immediately went to work. They went to work using the gifts that they had been given, in trust for master, and their work caused them to multiply. The third man, who had received one talent went to work as well, digging a hole, where he buried the measure of gold that he had been given, to hide it.

The three men were given a long time to work. It doesn't specify how long, but the text says that "after a long time" the man came back and asked for an accounting of what had been done with the money that he had so freely and generously handed out.

The first man, who had received five talents, had a lot to show for his work, five talents more than he had been given. The master's response was "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." (Matthew 25:21)

When the second man, who had received two talents came before his master, he two had doubled the money, and the master's response was exactly the same. "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." (Matthew 25:23)

But when the third man, the man who had received one talent and then buried it, came before his master, that pattern didn't follow. The man gave his

account, which was less of an account and more of an excuse. He said, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”

(Matthew 25:24b-25)

The master was angry at the man’s treatment of his money and of his reasons. This was the response:

“You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, 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 nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 25:26-30)

The master was angry that the man had not done even the bare minimum to create a return on the investment that he had made in him.

But perhaps it was the man’s characterization of the master that angered him most of all. He took his property back from him, and threw him out of his presence.

An argument could be made that the one talent man was thrown out of the master’s presence because he clearly didn’t want to be in the presence of the master. He didn’t like him. He feared him. He blamed him. He thought that he was harsh. Why would he want to stay in the presence of a man who he hated and feared?

That’s the story. But what does it mean?

The gospel of Matthew was written about 50 to 60 years after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection and ascension. To the Christians that the gospel of Matthew was written to Jesus was like a man who had gone on a journey and left

his servants in charge of some very important work. But he did not leave them with nothing to work with. Instead he gave them a feast of abundance. He gave them:

- a community,
- he gave him the blessing of his words, his stories and the stories of the Jewish people, a faith community that had lived in hope and communion with God through the centuries, sometimes seeing God at work and sometimes waiting for God to work,
- he gave them a meal that they could share together so that they could experience his presence,
- and he gave them instructions about what they were to do while they waited, how they could make a return on the investment of priceless grace that Jesus had poured out on them when he lived for them and died for them and came back for them, and promised to be with them always.

Their charge was to do the work that Jesus did, to heal and give hope to the people around them. Their charge was to be light and salt in the world, to be peacemakers, to love their neighbors and their enemies, to give generously, to trust in God, to go out into the world, making disciples, teaching and preaching and baptizing, and to remember Jesus, with them in the communion meal, with them, always, to the end of the age.

And Jesus knew them. Jesus loved them for who they were. He did not ask them for what they were incapable of, gave them what they needed to do what they could do with the abilities that they had.

But by the time the gospel of Matthew was written it was a long time after the events of Jesus life and ministry and death and resurrection. And there were probably some, in the church who had begun to wonder, was Jesus coming back? Were the gifts that Jesus had given really enough to combat the challenges of life

and faith in the Roman Empire, which had a very different belief system and a very different set of expectations for what a good life than the treasures that those early Christians had come to know and value in the church? Were the promises of a kingdom yet to come, glimpsed in the reign of Jesus, in their lives, but still unfulfilled in terms of the world that they inhabited, worth the risks and sacrifices of being servants of the Lord, Jesus?

There might have been some who, in the realities of and challenges of life, when disease or death came into their lives, when they saw natural disasters unchecked by the God they had come to experience as the one ruling power in the universe, or when being a Christian cost them friends or money thought that the answer was no. There were probably some who started to stray way from the treasure of grace that they had received from Jesus, so that they could lead a more normal, less risky life.

So, the author of the gospel of Matthew, a leader in one of those early Christian communities gathered his community's stories about Jesus that had been passed down and shared between churches since Jesus' ascension and he put them together to tell the story of the life of Jesus, a story of good news, in a story made up of stories, intended to strengthen the faith of his community and to remind them that it matters. It matters what you do and why you do it. And he included today's story, today's parable in his story of stories. It was a story about the return on investment in the life of faith; abundance given, time given, and returns made.

The first two talent receiving men were models for Christians who had taken the grace that they had received from their Lord and used it to transform their lives and the lives of those around them. The fivefold and twofold return on investment were those people whose lives were touched by the ministry of those who were living in and sharing the abundance of God. People who were baptized and taught, people who had seen and experienced Christians living in peace, enemies who had

been forgiven, people who had been recipients of their generosity, people who had experienced how hope had transformed their lives.

The third talent receiving man represented those who were shaken in their trust in the master. They were those who took the abundance that had been poured out on them and tucked it away, hidden their light, started to question and doubt the goodness and generosity of God.

We, like those three talent-receiving men, like the church throughout the centuries are waiting and lately the waiting has grown hard. Everyday there is some new disaster breaking in on our personal or communal lives, political unrest, violent clashes between people in the streets of our own capital city, over 184,000 new cases of Covid-19 diagnosed just yesterday and over 250,000 deaths, a southeast overwhelmed by hurricanes and flooding, western states overwhelmed by fire, holidays coming with no idea what that might look like in terms of gathering with family and friends, and the endless challenges of work and school and caring for those whose financial life or whose emotional life is in ruins during a time of great disruption in our lives.

For us, as for Christians throughout the centuries, it might be tempting to decide that the grace that we have received from God just isn't enough to meet the challenges of this day, that we need to use all of our energy, all of our resources in shoring ourselves up, in making sure that we're okay, in making sure that we get through.

Throughout the centuries, there have been those who have made their faith an afterthought, kept it buried in the ground, because they did not believe that they could trust their Lord to care for them if they used what God had given them for the work that God had called them to do.

But throughout the centuries there have been those who have, while living through deeply challenging times, the times we read about in history books, who have continued to live their faith, believing that their Lord Jesus was with them,

believing that God's abundant love and grace were to be shared, believing that in the presence of Jesus, who was still with them and in their communities, the kingdom of heaven had come near. They still, in spite of the challenges that they faced, worked and lived like that reign of Christ was the most important reality in their lives. And they lived like they believed that someday the Lord who loved them and had gifted them would return to see and celebrate with them the ways in which those gifts had been used to embody the kingdom of heaven in the world. They believed it that it matters. If you say that you're a Christian, it matters. It matters. It matters what you do and why you do it.