

Sermon Pentecost 22A 2011-11-13

Matthew 25:14-30

*The Joy of the Kingdom*

Have you ever had one of those days where everything just falls into place? Where a challenge is set before you and suddenly everything just works together and through no effort of your own, the solution of the challenge is gift-wrapped for you? When we set the date for our congregational meeting to discuss the mission spending plan, I never looked at the reading set for the day. Turning to the lectionary this week to prepare for the Tuesday morning bible study, I could easily have made it into one of those moments. Imagine the coincidence of the mission spending plan and the parable of the talents.

Three servants are given the task of caring for the master's estate while he is on a journey. One is given five talents, another two, and a third is given just one talent. A talent by the way is a Greek monetary unit... and a large one at that. Anyway, the first two servants take their money and use it. In the process they both double the amount the pastor...err, I mean, MAS-ter had given them. The third servant though is in a pickle. He's afraid of the master. And he just buries the talent in the ground and holds on to it until the master returns. And sure enough when the master returns, he is not happy with this servant. Instead of hearing "Well done good and faithful servant!" he is accused of being wicked and lazy. Instead of entering into the joy the master, the servant is cast into the outer darkness where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Preachers could become giddy with such an alignment. It's like being given the freedom to just out and out lay it on the congregation, "Don't be like that wicked and lazy servant! Make sure

you do your part for the spending plan!” Nothing like making use of the wrath of God to scare you all into giving, supporting the congregation’s budget. I certainly would not be the first one to do such a thing. And if I didn’t have the guts to do that, maybe I could just turn this parable into a little pep talk. Talk about doing one’s best. Or maybe I could use this parable as a tirade against those who attack capitalism. Clearly, I might say, Jesus asks why the third servant does not just give the money to the bankers so he would at least earn interest... so Jesus is condoning interest and thereby the entire modern banking system.

Except that all of these approaches would be off the mark. Using the reading for today to bolster giving and support for the spending plan is not faithful. Ripping this parable out of context renders its good news powerless. By taking the parable from where it belongs, we are left with false targets. The gift-wrapped sermon is an illusion.

The peril, you see, lies in removing this parable from Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom. The kingdom is that event that is coming soon, at the end of time, when God puts an end to the brokenness of the world, wiping away hunger and thirst, and death and grief. Jesus’ whole teaching section here in Matthew 25 is focused on those final things when God sets all the wrongs to right through the words of judgment.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes,

...once any parable is divorced from its apocalyptic context, misreading is inevitable... Jesus is not using this parable to recommend that we should work

hard, make all we can, to give all we can. Rather, the parable is a clear judgment against those who think they deserve what they have earned, as well as those who do not know how precious is the gift that they have been given. (*Matthew*, pp. 209-210)

The master gives the servants the talents in relation to their abilities. The servants do not earn the talents. They are not tests to see if the servants are worthy. If they had been unworthy, they would not have been given anything.

The focal point for Jesus is the perspective the servants have toward the talents. The third servant is afraid because of the view he has of the Master and the talent. For this servant, the talent could only be lost or used up. The talent becomes then, not a gift, but a possession. He views the talent through a lens of scarcity. The other two servants on the other hand see the talents not as possessions, but as the gifts they were meant to be. Securing the gifts would be to lose them. These two servants then use the talents in that spirit... gifts that are meant to be given.

When Christ so graciously gives us his name, when we are called “Christians” in the waters of baptism, we are entrusted with a gift. We are given a life that is about following Jesus. When we are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ, we are given a gift that some try to protect, and some believe is worthless. Again, Hauerwas writes,

Jesus’ disciples are not called to do great things, although great things may

happen. Rather, Jesus' disciples are called to do the work that Jesus has given us to do—work as simple and as hard as learning to tell the truth and to love our enemies. Such work is the joy that our master invites us to share.” (p.210)

Jesus gives us abundant gifts in the call to discipleship, grace and peace and love. Gifts that are meant to be used in the same spirit that we have been given them. These gifts are meant to be used in service to others. Our lives of discipleship are not zero-sum games but overflow with the goodness of God. To engage in this sort of life is not to engage in a pointless existence where we are used up. To enter into this sort of life is to enter into the reality of God's Kingdom. This Kingdom is coming to be sure. It cannot be stopped. Following Jesus' call and living in this Kingdom life can mean such things as loving God and neighbor, friends and enemies alike, speaking truthfully, practicing forgiveness and so on.

Christ calls us to a life of unimagined richness in following him. Discipleship is a joy into which we are brought ever more fully at the end when we are welcomed at the end... This is the gift-wrapped life. To be workers in God's kingdom. This is joy into which we are welcomed and it pervades our entire existence. Touching everything.

Thanks be to God. Amen.