

“How Do We Wait?”

A sermon preached by

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Matthew 25:14-30 (CEB)

¹⁴“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. ¹⁵To one he gave five valuable coins, (called talents) and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant’s ability. Then he left on his journey.

¹⁶“After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. ¹⁸But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master’s money.

¹⁹“Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, ‘Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained five more.’

²¹“His master replied, ‘Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

²²“The second servant also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained two more.’

²³“His master replied, ‘Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

²⁴“Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, ‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven’t sown. You gather crops where you haven’t spread seed. ²⁵So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what’s yours.’

²⁶“His master replied, ‘You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven’t sown and that I gather crops where I haven’t spread seed? ²⁷In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. ²⁸Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. ²⁹Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don’t have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them. ³⁰Now take the worthless servant and throw him outside into the darkness.’

“People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

This week the church staff sat around the church's conference room table and told our favorite Thanksgiving stories. Some of them were funny, some were a little sad. I won't bore you with the details, but the thing that strikes me about Thanksgiving is the universality that comes from gathering with friends and family to be grateful. There is something very comforting about asking your mom or your grandmother how to make the salad, the pie, the stuffing the same way it was made when you were a kid. There is something about sitting around the card table with your cousins, watching the Lions play football, napping after the meal, that has a quality and claim upon those of us who live in this country.

What is not as comforting is that across the world today, liturgical congregations are struggling with Matthew's parable of the talents. Throughout the story, there are stumbling blocks to our finding grace and a heavenly vision here. First, there is the use of the term slaves often used in the translation of the text. That is not something we can support without at first speaking to the injustice of human trafficking.

Then there is the fact that on the surface, it has the sound of a prosperity gospel tale, trickle-down economics for the heavenly realm. Today when we hear the word talent, the word in English might lead us to believe the story might be about skills or aptitude. But not so. In Jesus' time, a talent was an enormous sum of money, something close to \$15 million in today's dollars. It also weighed something between 50 and 75 pounds, so burying it isn't all that clueless. Some churches may be working on their stewardship campaigns, so the story might help the preacher make the point about giving.

But the truth is that unless you hear the story in the context of Matthew's apocalyptic vision you are likely to miss the point. As I said last week, Matthew and the early church community as a whole had a full and complete anticipation that Jesus' return was going to happen soon. Matthew is much more interested in *using* ultimate judgment as a future/present, as a way of encouraging an engagement with rather than a burying of talents.

One apocalyptic feature of the parable is the premise underlying the parable: the returning master. The question for the early church and indeed for us today is, what does the church do in this crucial time between resurrection and Parousia. The early church, experiencing the "absence of the master," became increasingly aware that they were now the caretakers of the property that had been entrusted to them.

This week Karoline Lewis, in her reflection on this parable,¹ wrote that in the context of all of this possible interpretation, perhaps the single most important question we 21st century Christians should be addressing from this parable is, *What are you doing with what you have been given? And are you using your gifts for the sake of your own gain or for the sake of nearing the Kin-dom of Heaven.*

A couple of weeks ago 16 people from our congregation traveled to Houston, Texas to help out with Hurricane Harvey relief as a part of our ongoing connectional work through our United Methodist sisters and brothers. There they encountered homes that had been completely inundated with 6 to 8 feet of water and the home owners had lost everything. While the group was there, they stayed in the Woodcrest United Methodist Church in Lumberton, TX.

The people of Woodcrest and their pastor Charles Jordan had become a “pop up shelter” during the storm. They were not supposed to be a shelter location, but the church is located on a slight rise of land, and so it didn’t flood. Pretty soon people were coming to the church asking for shelter, and so they set up cots. At the height of the floods over two hundred people were staying there. They didn’t have food for them, but local restaurants called and said, we lost our power, can you use our food? They didn’t have laundry facilities, but a couple dozen church members took the guests’ laundry home and brought it back the next day clean and folded. Over and over again they responded with the gifts that they had been given.

In contrast, 100 miles away in Houston, the 16,000-seat Lakewood Church pastored by Joel Osteen failed to open its doors. First, they said it was because they had water in their basement. Later Osteen said he hadn’t been asked by the city to open its doors. Finally, a few days later, bowing to public pressure, they did open their doors to offer assistance. When asked “What are you doing with what you have been given?” Osteen, who owns a 10 million-dollar home and preaches a prosperity gospel, didn’t have an answer that would be recognizable to Jesus.

In this Thanksgiving season, we would do well to examine our own tendencies to hold fast to what we have, to bury our talents, our gifts, our resources even though by any empirical

¹ Karoline Lewis, *Entrustment*, www.workingpreacher.org, November 12, 2017

measure we have more than enough to share. John Shea writes that ultimately this is due to our image of God.

If, like the servant who buried the talent, we envision the master as harsh, unforgiving, someone who “gathers but did not scatter, and reaps but did not sow,”² this plays into a psychological and social hardness. This Scrooge vision of the master, a boss from hell, makes us timid, careful, fearful in our response. The result is that we continue to hold fast to that which we have been given. This vision of God causes us to wait in fear.

But if we can live into a vision of God as grace-filled parent, as loving encourager, as one who gives today our daily bread and delivers us from our own failings, we wait for the return of the master in love. This vision allows us to live not as those who are forced to comply to harsh demands, but instead who are invited to give, share, and multiply our gifts, because in doing so we are a reflection of the divine intension for the world and our place in it. To follow this God, this vision, this grace...is to be a good and faithful servant. AMEN

² John Shea, *On Earth As It Is In Heaven: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 323.