

Pentecost 23 – A (2014)
Matthew 25:14-30
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

I'm guessing that almost everyone has heard the story from our Bible reading from Matthew today. Three guys get portions of their master's money: Two handle it well and one shows up with the confession that he buried the seed money he received, and it didn't grow. Jesus offers us today a provocative parable - but provocative for His original hearers in ways different than for us.

For his original hearers, the opening line of the story would be a shocker. No significant property holder would entrust the entirety of one's property to slaves in Roman culture, not even for a short period of time. This man was giving these three slaves the equivalent of 120 years of daily wages to manage. This man is either crazy or incredibly trusting of his slaves to do the right thing.

What two of the slaves did next was also shockingly offensive to a Jewish audience and could have felt uncomfortable to many Christian audiences until well into the sixteenth century when some Protestants began to relax laws against earning interest on loans. Indeed, these slaves committed a grave sin, called usury, by making money with money. Worse, they did it with relish, taking the money and working it "immediately" until they doubled their investments. The third acted in the most morally, even "biblically" appropriate way—burying the money (15 years' worth of wages in his case) in order to protect it.

For us, it seems inconceivable that anyone receiving such a windfall would have just buried the money without investing it for the future. It would have been worse, however, if the man had spent it all frivolously – on wine, woman, and song. It seems far more rational to us to put at least some of that money away –even into a bank savings account to earn minimal interest if not government bonds or an IRA or even stocks or bonds.

Jesus was out to blow their minds-- and ours. He did. And he still does—if we're listening to him and not to the conventions of this world.

Jesus' speech here was intentionally provocative. He was not doling out good advice for daily living. He was describing the new reality that has already hit. In this parable, Jesus describes the kingdom of God and the way of Jesus. "Look," he says, "more is given to those who have." More is **given**. It is not that they earn it. It's a gift, an overflow of God's abundance, which God, like this master, is ready to give to us to care for, and indeed has done so in Jesus. Receive this

lavish gift, this good news and presence of God's kingdom, and live accordingly, and there will only be more to follow.

Quaker theologian/philosopher Parker Palmer tell a story about abundance. Palmer was a passenger on a plane that pulled away from the gate, taxied to a remote corner of the field and stopped. You may know the feeling: The plane stops, and you look out the window and see that you're not on the runway and the engines wind down and your heart sinks. The pilot came on the intercom and said, "I have some bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is there's a storm front in the West, Denver is socked in and shut down. We've looked at the alternatives and there are none. So, we'll be staying here for a few hours. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food and it's lunch time." Everybody groaned. Some passengers started to complain, some became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants did something amazing.

She stood up and took the intercom mike and said, "We're really sorry, folks. We didn't plan it this way and we really can't do much about it. And I know for some of you this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you may have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So, I'll tell you what we're going to do. I have a couple of breadbaskets up here and we're going to pass them around and I'm asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along — something to tide you over — just in case something like this happened, some peanut butter crackers, candy bars. And some of you have a few LifeSavers or chewing gum or Roloids. And if you don't have anything edible, you have a picture of your children or spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or a bookmark or a business card. Everybody put something in and then we'll reverse the process. We'll pass the baskets around again and everybody can take out what he/she needs.

"Well," Palmer said, "what happened next was amazing. The griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags, some got up and opened their suitcases stored in the overhead luggage racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, a bottle of wine. People were laughing and talking. She had transformed a group of people who were focused on need and deprivation into a community of sharing and celebration. She had transformed scarcity into a kind of abundance."

After the flight, which eventually did proceed, Parker Palmer stopped on his way off the plane — deplaning, that is — and said to her, "Do you know there's a story in the Bible about what you did back there? It's about Jesus feeding a lot of people with very little food."

“Yes,” she said. “I know that story. That’s why I did what I did.”

It is important for the church - this church, any church - to be like the servant with the five bags of silver who goes out and aggressively invests his resources. Within our church, we have a great storehouse of talents, and God calls us to live in a world of abundance by taking risks and being generous.

This means that we’re always willing to try new things, by sharing our abilities in creative worship and innovative educational events, for example. It means that we look outward to a world in need, and do what we can to feed hungry children, house homeless adults, and welcome the strangers and immigrants in our midst. God doesn’t want us to live in a world of scarcity and conserve what we have; instead, he wants us to invest our time and talents and treasures in ways that multiply our effectiveness as ambassadors of Christ to make more disciples of and for Christ.

From the gospel text this week, Jesus gives a stern warning -- discipleship does not promise a safe harbor. On the contrary, true disciples are called to take risks, weigh anchor, venture beyond the known and secure. Look, for a moment, at verses 24 and 25: "Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, '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.'" The key phrase is right in the middle: I WAS AFRAID.

Fear for followers of Jesus is not an option. Fear causes spiritual paralysis, and this is no virtue. Only those who live expectantly (with an emphasis on both those words — *live* and *expectantly*) will find the day of reckoning a good experience. To paraphrase Martin Luther’s thoughts: As long as you are going to live anyway, you should live boldly. I have learned in my years of choral singing that when we make a mistake singing, we should make it boldly, loudly and confidently.

And why can we live confidently and boldly? It is because the key to Jesus’ parable today is *not* how much *people* were willing to *risk*. The two issues in this story are about what *God* is ready to *entrust to us* and what kind of master we think God is. Loving God and living a life close to God is not a duty or a chore or a responsibility that we shouldn’t want. On the contrary: it is to our own benefit. It is life, health, happiness, joy, and peace. Living a life trusting and obeying God results in benefits and grace beyond even our imagination.

There is uncertainty in life. No one knows the day or the hour of Christ’s return. It will be like “a thief in the night.” But for those who are in Christ now, this does not need to be a bad surprise. The body of Christ is a people who knows how to be ready. We are “of the day,” he says.

We don't "live for the night" of partying, dissipation and drunkenness. We live for the day, sober, alert, watchful, not in fear but in readied, joyous hope. When we hope for the best, we expect the best.

In verse 5 of our passage from Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians today, Paul also reminds us that we are "... children of the light, children of the day. We are not of the night or the darkness." In other words, while the rest of the world lives in panic and worry over inconsequential things -- and will be truly caught off guard when the only important thing arrives, namely the Son of God in glory -- we have the light of truth shining upon us. We have the light of our victory tomorrow shining upon us, adding context, perspective and clarity to *today*.

Think about it. By faith we grasp that the death of Christ has covered over our sin and shame, the resurrection of Christ has crushed our enemy, called "death," and the return of Christ will usher in unending peace. Such clarity allows us to live with the "lights on," seeing things as they truly are: annoying but inconsequential, painful but not permanent, difficult but not determinate of our destiny.

It is like Eleanor Roosevelt once said: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." And our dreams, as Christians, *are* beautiful. They are beautiful, because as Christians we know that Christ's Easter resurrection makes the future sure.

The lives of believers are to be as different and as obvious from the lives of non-believers as day is from night, light is from darkness, waking is from sleeping, and sobriety is from drunkenness. If one cannot tell a person is a believer by his or her behavior, then that believer has some work to do. And the believer had best get started on that work right away because, as in the other texts, the clock is ticking. The day of judgment is coming, and Paul wants to be sure the followers of Christ have confidence that the Lord will see them vindicated in the eyes of those who now despise and insult them for the choices and values that are on clearly on display for everyone to ridicule.

Once again, the lesson is a clarion call to prepare for the coming judgment by living a life that honors God in every single choice, action, and relationship. It is also a harsh wake-up call for those of us whose actions, words and lifestyles don't necessarily differentiate us from non-Christians.

The "parable of the talents," as this week's reading is often called, is one of the most powerful and disturbing illustrations of the radical disjuncture between the ways of the kingdoms of this world and the ways of the kingdom of God. It seems to reverse even expectations "good Christians" have about those whom God would bless versus those whom God would curse. Here,

the wealthy are blessed, and the one who chooses to remain poor – who chooses to live by fear – who chooses to play it safe - is not only cursed but cast out.

God has never been one to play it safe. A God not interested in taking risks would never have created Adam in the first place. But God not only risked creation, God risked relationship -- first with Noah, again with Abraham, eternally with David and the people of Israel. Finally, God even risked the divine self - taking human form in the incarnation and suffering an ignominious death, only to rise again in the miracle of the resurrection.

If God risked everything in the person of Jesus Christ for the sake of our salvation, doesn't it seem likely that this same God might expect more than self-seeking, self-motivated, safety-conscious behavior from those who have been so wondrously saved? Ironically, as the 21st century is well underway, humanity finally is beginning to get comfortable with the notion that risk is part of the natural "disorder" of things.

God makes the promise and then delivers on that promise that sin and death do not and will not have the final word. Darkness will not overcome light. The evils of this present world will be overcome by light. God offers grace beyond measure and gifts beyond counting. Our God is a God of more than enough. Enough is given, more is promised, and with that kind of guarantee, we can be confident to live with the promise of greater things to come.