

Pentecost +27 - Year A
16 November 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Matthew 25:14-30

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

As this church year draws to a close and we look toward the beginning of a new year with the first Sunday of Advent in only two weeks, we are fast approaching the end of our time with the Gospel of Matthew.

Next week, we have our last lesson from Matthew's Gospel, and the Sunday after Thanksgiving we will begin our new lectionary year with gospel readings mostly from Mark's Gospel. As with any good story, important parts come at the end. So, in the context of an almost ending, Matthew's Gospel today again has good news to share,

Today's gospel text is set on Tuesday of what would become known as Holy Week. On Sunday, Jesus had entered the city of Jerusalem and disrupted things in the Temple as he threw out the money changers and merchants. On Monday, he had taught in the Temple and tangled with various groups of Jewish leaders on their own turf – in the Temple court. Questions about Jesus' authority, paying taxes, and the resurrection had been asked and answered. Jesus had taught in parables that were really thinly veiled indictments of the Temple authorities and Jewish leaders.

Now, it is Tuesday. Now, the audience for Jesus' teaching is no longer the crowd or the Temple authorities and Jewish leaders. Now, the audience is Jesus' followers. Teaching that is directed

to those who are his disciples only two days before his arrest at Gethsemane, only three days before his crucifixion. Jesus' last lesson on discipleship.

The parable that we have read today is the sixth of seven parables and dramas with which Jesus' concluded what has been called "the Judgment Discourse." Last Sunday, we read the fifth of these – the story of the twelve bridesmaids. And, next Sunday, we will read the last of the seven.

The parable of the talents. A story about a man who went on a long journey and entrusted his assets to three slaves. Two of the slaves expanded and enlarged what each had been given. One buried what the master had given him. He hadn't lost any of it. No, it was intact and whole, just as the Master had given it to him. But there had been no expansion, no enlargement. And, we heard how the master viewed the performance of each of the three slaves.

Now, as with most parables, there are a variety of ways that people have interpreted the parable of the talents.

It could be interpreted as an example of good stewardship and used as support for the annual financial pledge campaign. But, we've already finished that campaign here this year; and, in any event, I believe this use of the parable would be misleading as to what the real meaning of stewardship is.

Or, the parable could be used to encourage giving as a "quid pro quo" – give to receive some kind of reward or at least avoid punishment – again I think this would be misleading as to what real stewardship is.

Or, perhaps the parable could be used to justify certain economic practices or hard work - but again I think these interpretations miss the mark.

No, I don't think we can use this parable to support a pledge campaign or to discover Jesus' investment advice (in the current economic situation, the slave who simply buried the master's assets and therefore didn't lose anything might actually look like the smart one, after all, mightn't he?). Or, we can't use it to say that Jesus was a firm believer in the Protestant work ethic.

So, if it's not about financial giving, or investment advice, or working hard with what we have, what message might we take away from this parable today? What might we appropriately hear as the message that Jesus would want to leave with those closest to him so near the time of his death? What might be the message that Jesus has for us disciples here today?

Now you know that I rarely, if ever, have used alliterations to label the points of my sermons – but today, I'm going to do just that. I'm going to label my points about this parable with three g's – gift, gospel, and God.

First, the gift. It is critical to recognize that the “talents” with which the slave were entrusted never belonged to them. They were not possessions to be owned by them. It doesn't appear that they had done anything to deserve them. And, they were tremendously precious gifts indeed. You see a “talent,” as used in the telling of this parable didn't have anything to do with the skills or competencies that the slaves possessed. Nothing like we use the word talent now, things like playing the piano or being a fine cook or having great organizing skills. No, in its use here, a “talent” was an extravagantly huge amount of money. It's been estimated that one talent would have been about fifteen years' wages or a typical worker.

Can you imagine someone entrusting you with that kind of money? Five talents, two talents, even one talent. No matter, how you look at it, that's a lot of money and a whole lot of trust.

So, whatever these slaves made of these "talents," whatever they had done was based first and foremost on the gift of being invited to share in what ultimately belonged to the master. And, what a huge and precious gift it was!

And, what gift – the second "g" in my alliteration - could ever be this huge? What invitation could be this precious? More than one commentator has suggested that this huge, precious gift was the gift of the gospel, the good news of Jesus of Nazareth who brought the kingdom of heaven into the world. Earlier in Matthew, the gospel has been described as "a pearl of great value" – a pearl so valuable that it was worth selling everything one owned in order to possess it.

These commentators have suggested that the real point of this parable is what Christians do or do not do with the gospel as they wait for the coming of the kingdom of heaven, God's kingdom, in its fullness.

For Matthew's intended readers, first century Christians living several decades after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, following Jesus' instructions to act on what they believed, to live out the good news of this one they loved and served, entailed some risk. Proclaiming the kingdom values of mercy, peace, and forgiveness to everyone entailed some risk. Public expression of the good news that Jesus was the Messiah entailed some risk.

So, the question played out in this parable for those early readers was whether they would keep the gospel, this great gift, tucked away in a secure place and play it safe or whether they would let this gift loose into the broader world, to all the nations, Jews and Gentiles – as Jesus has

instructed. Anticipating Jesus' return meant rejecting the lure of security and safety, refusing to be subject to fear and intimidation, taking the risk of discipleship, with all its dangers and perils.

A precious gift, the gospel, given by God. There's that final "g."

The master in this parable was described as someone who entrusted his slaves with vast sums of money, not just for a day or two, but for a long time as he went on his extended journey. When they honored his trust by expanding and enlarging what they had been given, he didn't just pat them on the back or give them a gold watch. No, he gave them the challenge of more responsibility and greater authority, along with what was no doubt greater risk. It even appears that he welcomed these slaves into his home as members of his family – "enter into the joy of your master." The first two slaves clearly experienced the master as trusting, welcoming, generous, and benevolent.

Based on what we see from the experience of the first two slaves it seems as if the on-talent slave badly misjudged his master, seeing him as an arbitrary, mean-spirited despot. And, in theological terms, the one-talent slave pronounced his own judgment and got what one commentator has called "the peevish, tyrant god he believed in."

The precious gift of the gospel given by a God who invites us to participate in the mission of bringing the kingdom of heaven into the world in all its fullness. God who is ready to share in the delight of his presence.

When we humans, whom God created out of a pure desire to share God's total and complete love and joy, when we picture God fearfully instead of lovingly, we violate our own natures and we unmake creation as God intended it. The fate of being cast into utter darkness isn't meant to

describe what God wants at all, but rather how important it is that we see God's true nature and then live our lives accordingly.

As Jesus faced the cross, I think he wanted to leave those disciples with confidence – confidence in the great gift of the gospel; confidence that they served a God who was trust, welcome, generosity, and benevolence; confidence that they could share in the work of the kingdom without fear; confidence that they could take the risk that love always demands. In his last lesson on discipleship, Jesus wanted those disciples to know that they could act of love and not fear.

And, Jesus wants us disciples gathered here today to know that we, too, can act out of love and not fear. We can be free to let the gift of the gospel – the good news – loose into the world

A gift, the gospel, and God who sends us out into the world empowered by the love of the one who told this story. What more could we need?

AMEN.