

November 15, 2020 – 24th Sunday after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Psalm 90:1-12

Zephaniah 1:7-16

Matthew 25:14-30 Parable of the Talents

A Good and Faithful Master¹

The texts appointed for the end of the Church Year focus on the return of Jesus and his judgment of the living and dead. This theme began last week with Jesus' words at the beginning of Matthew 25 and the parable of the ten virgins (vv 1-13). It continues this week with the parable of the talents (vv 14-30) and concludes next week with Jesus' teaching about the sheep and goats (vv 31-46).

Focusing on Jesus' return leads to several distinct (and opposite) attitudes among Christians. Just like the Thessalonian Christians, on the one hand, we long for his return and his reign over the new heavens and earth. So, we pray that Jesus would come quickly. On the other hand, the reality that so many people in our families and communities are living apart from Jesus creates in us a desire for Jesus, graciously, to delay his return until they have heard and believed the good news. So, we pray fervently for God to work through the Church to bring more into his fold

The readings for this Sunday address the concerns about the end times. Zephaniah speaks of the urgency of repentance before the judgment of Yahweh comes against disobedient people. In the Epistle, Paul also highlights the approaching end (1 Thess. 5:1-8). But he emphasizes the good news of

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salvation for all who live in Christ (5:9-11) as he writes: *“For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with Him. Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”*²

Introduction: There are two types of people in this world. For example, those who regularly delete old messages on their phone and those who have 1,200 unread messages (we won't even discuss old emails). Or perhaps, as Pastor Bernthal would put it, those who are fishermen and those who are not. I remember in the old days of Detroit where you were either a Tigers fan or you were from another city. Everyone knew the players like Hal Newhouser, Hank Greenberg, George Kell, Al Kaline, Lou Whitaker, Allen Trammel, Willie Horton. If you knew these names and the position they played, well, you just were really a Detroiter; otherwise, sadly, you were not.

There are many ways we could divide people. When Jesus told the parable of the talents as it's recorded in Matthew 25, he was giving us his own version of this. There are two types of servants in this parable: those who are faithful, and those who are not.

Hear Jesus' story of two types of servants.

First of all, let's clear up the word “talents” used here. “Talents” refers to a unit of measure by weight, not skills or abilities. Matthew is the only New Testament writer to use this term. But you will remember that Matthew's previous vocation was as a tax collector, he knew his weights and measures. A talent was about 75 pounds in weight.

² 1 Thess. 5:9-11, ESV

It is difficult to determine the value but, if the master used silver, at today's value of \$26.00 an ounce, 75 pounds of silver would be worth about \$31,000 dollars. So, five talents today would be worth \$155,000, two talents \$62,000, one talent \$31,000. If the talent weight was in gold, the value would be 60 times more. So, the amounts entrusted to each servant were not trivial. Their use and security carried significant responsibility. After all those mental gyrations about values, which satisfies the curiosity of the engineers and accountants listening today, I want you to erase them from your mind. Because, the focus in the parable is not on the amount or value, but rather on the fact that it belongs to the master (v 14).

You will notice the master was going on a journey, not an overnight or weekend trip. He was going to be gone for a long time, long enough that his property had to be put into the trust of his servants. They had to carry on the master's business. Secondly, you will notice that he gave the five, two and one talent "according to his ability". He knew the capabilities of his servants. The 5-2-1 distribution of his property was not arbitrary, rather the master understood his servants who had been by his side daily and would not give them more than they could handle.

After the master left, the first two servants "went at once and traded with them". They went right to work and went about their master's business without hesitation. They had been observing their master's methods and knew how to put the money to work. The third servant, however, who had received the one talent (according to his ability), and who had been trained by the same master, did differently. He dug a hole in the ground and "hid his master's money." He acted out of fear. Afraid of risking and losing some or all, he buried it. The ground all filled in, tamped down, and smoothed, the talent lay completely useless.

“Now, after a long time,” the master came and settled accounts with the servants. What the “long time” was is not identified, however it seems that the time would be measured not in days, but in years. The time necessary to honestly double one’s money, even at good rates of return, takes years not days. The master had a serious, working business, involving agriculture, not a casino. So, after a long absence, the master returns and there is to be a reckoning.

The first servant who was entrusted with 5 talents earned 5 talents more and presents all 10 talents to the master. His master’s response is: *“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much.”* The first servant then receives the ultimate reward: *“Enter into the joy of your master.”* The second servant does likewise and doubles the two talents into four. The master, likewise, commends him. The master concludes his accounting with both of the faithful servants by inviting them to *“enter into the joy of your master.”* This deserves special attention, for the joy of the master is more than a pat on the back. It stands in sharp contrast to the darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth in verse 30. This is not to say that there was no joy to be found in their work while the master was gone. But it highlights that the reward for faithfulness will be characterized by rejoicing.

In contrast, the third servant who was entrusted with one talent, shows that he did not understand the master at all saying: *“I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid.”* This insult is not overlooked, for the master repeats the phrase adding a large question mark. The unfaithful servant had so mis-judged the master that he acted out of fear. He had buried the one talent in the ground where it lay useless for the entire time, while it could have been utilized in a productive purpose. Then, at the accounting, he says to the master: *“Here you have what is yours”*, missing the entire point of carrying out the master’s

business. The servant had been unfaithful to his master's trust and took the easy, lazy way out; producing nothing. His reward? The one talent is taken away and given to the servant who had 10 talents; and the unfaithful servant is cast out. The casting out into outer darkness has ominous consequences, for it is described as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

While there are three different servants in this parable, there are only two types of servants: faithful and unfaithful. Notice that the two types of servants parallel the previous parable in which there were only two types of virgins.

The good and faithful servant becomes the good and faithful Master.

When we commend the faithful service of workers in the church, we tend to use the often-quoted phrase from the master: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (vv 21, 23). That is good, fine and true. But in reading this parable, we need to focus more on God and his gracious work than us and our service to him. We need to step back and see this parable in its broader context.

In this part of Matthew's Gospel just before the Passion section, Jesus is preparing his disciples by speaking about the end of his ministry and his ultimate return. As we live in these last days, we all need to consider these things as we respond to the Master. While we can easily comprehend this parable in terms of Jesus Christ, the Master, who returns to bring into account what we have done with the gifts He has given us; and whether they have been used to advance the Kingdom of God. We also see ourselves as servants who respond either faithfully or unfaithfully to Him. Sometimes the product we present to Him is good, and sometimes, being sinners, not so good.

There is only one who is truly and fully "good and faithful", which is, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He demonstrates his goodness by making gracious promises to you and me. He demonstrates his faithfulness by delivering on

these promises. Jesus is a "good" Servant in a number of ways¹ including his obedience to the Father, and his kindness to the outcast and sinner. He is a "faithful" Servant by fulfilling all of God's promises. He fulfilled the prophets of old, and he fulfilled his own resurrection promise.³ In his resurrection, this good and faithful Servant demonstrated that he was not only a servant, but that he is also Master. He reigns over all things, including death. His resurrection from the dead confirms the faithfulness to all his promises, including his promise to return on the Last Day.

The Master is good and faithful to us too. He gives us something worth living for by entrusting his work to us. He is forgiving and merciful to those who trust him. He promises eternal joy at his return, and he gives us a foretaste of this joy here and now as we gather together and receive his gifts of Word and Sacrament. What is this joy? Hebrews 12:2 speaks of the joy set before Jesus that enabled him to endure the suffering and shame of the cross. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 says "... that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself ,..." In Christ, God reconciles us and we will be again, as before the Fall, in intimate fellowship with God. Our heart's desire and His.

God makes us his good and faithful servants.

We are called to be "good and faithful" servants. There is much to be done in the period between the Master's leaving and His return. The story of our faithfulness is yet to be written. We are in the midst of using the property the Lord has given us. Our very life. The fact that He entrusts us with His property in accordance with our abilities is an act of grace. We have been brought into His service through Baptism, continue to be nourished by His Word, and we are expected to respond to His mission call. The promise of the Master's return still

³ John 2:18-22, ESV

stands, along with the joy that will be complete.

Now he sends us to be "good and faithful" according to our vocations. Not just our jobs, but all situations in which we find ourselves; fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, fellow workers, neighbors, and fellow Christians.

As we look forward, I invite you to see one another as fellow servants. The two faithful servants in the parable could have been helpful to the unfaithful servant by encouraging and supporting him. When we perceive a need among our fellow servants for encouragement toward faithfulness, simply give it in love, without criticism.

Remember this, there are two types of people in this world: those who are faithful, and those who are not. Jesus is the good and faithful man par excellence. That is, Jesus is good to us and faithful to His promises!

He is our Master, and he is both good and faithful to us, his servants. This Master is coming back soon. Come quickly, good and faithful Master. And help us, we pray, to become good and faithful servants.

And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.