

Year A Proper 33 2023 Well done, good and trustworthy servant Matt 25 14 to 30

In today's story we learn that not only are we all given gifts by God – because, of course the master in this story is meant to be understood as God to a certain extent – but, more importantly, we are expected to make use of them and we don't know how much time we have to make use of our gifts – the Lord could come back at any time. The message is clear – we are to make use of our gifts *now*. Why and how are we to use our gifts?

This story, just like several others that have come before it, are stories Jesus has told to his disciples in order to prepare them for life without him. He knows will be leaving them. He knows they will struggle in his absence, wondering when he will come back. He knows he *will* come back. Jesus does not abandon us, does not leave us floundering in his absence. He prepares us well for the delay in his return as well as for the return itself by making it clear how we are to live in the meantime.

Today we are assured that each of us is given gifts from God, gifts that we are to use to carry on the work of the physically absent Jesus Christ. This is what it means to live the gospel, to live the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaimed that God's kingdom is here and then he lived a life that revealed that kingdom to the world. We are to use our gifts to reveal the goodness already in the world and to create more goodness in this world, striving always toward the fulfillment of God's kingdom.

We are *all* provided with gifts to use to reveal God's kingdom and build the body of Christ. We are not given the same gifts but, rather, we are given what suits our abilities. Three servants are entrusted today with some of their master's money. One is given 5 talents, one is given two talents, the other servant is given only one. It may not sound like they are given very much until we put it into perspective. One

denarius was the pay for a day of work. Each talent was worth 6000 denarii. So each servant was given a huge sum of money. Every gift from God is a valuable gift.

Like the other parables we've heard recently (24:45-51; 25:1-13), the return of the master is certain, but the timing is unknown. After a long absence, the master does return to take stock of what each servant has done with the property he placed in their care. The first two servants do business with the master's talents and double his money. Although the first servant earned significantly more than the second, they both did remarkably well with what they had been given. They have used what was given to them to the best of their ability and they have been faithful to do what the master has required of them. The master's response to each is exactly the same. Different gifts. Different results. Same reward. First, the master says, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant!" I can think of nothing I would rather hear when I meet God than those words we hear today...Well done, good and trustworthy servant.

Next, the master gives the servants a promotion. He says they have done a good job with a little, so he's going to put them in charge of more. He's going to increase their responsibilities. This tells us that there will still be work to be done in God's kingdom. It won't be the same work as we're doing now in a broken world...what exactly it will be, we will have to wait to find out.

And finally, the master invites the servants to "come on in", enter his joy, share his happiness. The "come on in" is an invitation to enter the household, be a part of the family. For us, when we hear these words from Jesus, it is an invitation to enter into the fullness of God's kingdom, to be a part of one great family throughout the world.

Praise, promotion, and joy. Those servants are in. It is a different story with the third servant. This servant says that he was afraid and he hid the one talent by burying it in the ground. This may sound odd to us but it was actually common practice to bury treasure at that time. Sort of like hiding money under your mattress rather than trusting it to the banks. Why was this servant afraid? He tells us that his master is harsh and reaps where he did not sow and gathers where he did not scatter seed.

Does this sound like our God...taking what doesn't belong to him? Absolutely not: all good things come from God in the first place and God never takes what is not freely given. You can almost hear the sarcasm dripping from the master's words in response to the third servant..."So, I take what isn't mine, eh?" He's not falling for the servant's excuse and lets us know what's really going on...the servant is wicked and lazy. Why would the master call this servant "wicked" for simply hiding away his money rather than making more money? The servant's words tell us the answer: You reap where you didn't sow. You gather where you didn't plant. I didn't want to work hard with your money to make you more money. If it's my hard work then that money I make should be mine, not yours.

This is a trap many of us fall into, certainly helped along by the society around us which places high value on the so-called "self-made man". This isn't new. Moses actually warned the Israelites against this just before they entered the "promised land". He told them they were going to enter into abundance and cautioned them not to forget where it was all coming from. God is the source of all life and goodness. They forgot and many of us need reminders as well. We feel that what we have is of our own doing. There is a saying, very useful, to keep in mind: take the credit but give God the glory. The third servant had it all wrong. Fear for self-preservation and self-promotion were getting in the way. His master was not giving

him a gift for him to use for his own personal gain and glory. Likewise with God: God gives gifts to everyone to use in order to work with God toward the fulfillment of God's purpose – to reveal God's kingdom and to build the body of Christ.

Are we using our gifts to do this? Or are we, like the Israelites, using our gifts to make our own way in the world, thinking that life outside of church is very much separate from life within the church, working hard to get what we have and then giving some to God when we gather for worship and thinking to ourselves God should be pleased with what I'm handing back, it's mine and I could keep all of it if I wanted to. But this story isn't meant to be just about money. We tend to make it all about money because it does centre around using money to make more money.

Now – as it was then – success is about money. The people who are called successful are the people who have money because money gets you everything else that you need to be considered successful: house, car, clothes, status. Making money and then enjoying their money is what the overwhelming majority of people do or aim to do. In our society, money makes the world go 'round. We cannot totally escape this reality. Even when we try to place our priorities on family or friends or self, this almost always involves money.

A crucial part of Jesus' message throughout the gospels is that we have our priorities upside-down. Seek first the kingdom of God, he tells us, the rest will be given to you after that (Matt.6:33). This actually takes a lot of effort because thinking of God first before all else does not come naturally to most of us. One of the great scholars of the very early church – Tertullian – said, "Christians are not born; they are made." We are made Christians through spending time with God and learning about God. This is accomplished through participating in our liturgies, through study of scripture, and through prayer together and in private. Trying to do our good works

in love for others, letting our gifts shine for the glory of God, won't be sustainable if we have not first built the foundation of a strong relationship with God within ourselves. Like building a house on shifting sands, our work will frustrate and tire us without the fuel of joy and hope gained in first forming ourselves.

Worship, scripture study, prayer – gaining the knowledge and love of God and God's ways that gives us boundless joy and hope in the face of the world's brokenness, enables us to transform more and more into the perfection intended for us, enables us to use our lives filled with the Holy Spirit, the greatest of all our gifts, to reveal God's kingdom and to build the body of Christ, hastening the day when God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance.

What about the next bit...when Jesus says, "but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away"? It is the third servant who shows us what this means. I know you are a harsh man, he says. I was afraid, he says. The rest of Jesus' story shows us that this interpretation of the master is wrong. This master has entrusted his servants with vast sums of money, not just for a night or two but for an extended period of time. Plus, in a culture where servants were expected to do their duty without praise or perks, astonishingly this master gives them extravagant tribute, increased authority, and welcomes them into his home as members of his family. There is even the implication that he lets the first two servants keep the money they had made. Everything in this story leads us to see the master as an extraordinary man – trusting, welcoming, generous, and kind. That is the way the narrator of the parable presents him; that is the way the first two servants see him – otherwise they would not have been so free to risk and act – and that is the way the master conducts himself. Clearly, the third servant has misjudged the master, has

distorted his character. He viewed his master not just as tough, but as evil. This leaves him paralyzed, with no room for freedom or responsible action. The tragic news of this parable is that this third servant pronounces his own judgement; he gets only the master his tiny and warped vision can see. In theological terms, he gets the peevish little tyrant god he believes in. The story is not about a generous master suddenly turning cruel and punishing; it is about living with the consequences of one's own faith. If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to God's love in life and can discover the joy of God's guiding hand everywhere. But to...insist upon viewing God as oppressive, cruel, and fear-provoking is to live a life that is tragically impoverished. For those who live in the confidence that God is trustworthy and generous, they find more and more of that generosity – to those who have, more will be given; but for those who run and hide under the bed from a bad, mean, and scolding God, they condemn themselves to a life spent under the bed alone, quivering in needless fear. For those who have the values and material goods held in high esteem in this world will discover these things amount to nothing in God's kingdom. Those who have nothing, even the little they have will be taken away. Life without God is a life of nothingness.

Last week we learned the difference between wise and foolish bridesmaids. This week we have wise and foolish servants. Both stories contain the same message. How we live the lives we have been given as we await the guaranteed return of Christ, matters. Both stories end in darkness – a life without God – for the foolish.

Jesus provides us with what we need in order to be among the wise. To be wise is to live the truth of the good news – the mercy, peace, and forgiveness found in God's kingdom – because the future belongs to God and those are the values of the future. The master will return, the promised completeness of the kingdom is

coming, and its coming will render obsolete all the false values of this broken age. What will remain at Jesus' return is nothing else but the goodness of God and the goodness we create with God's gifts. It is true wisdom to live today the reality of what we know is coming: God's future (parts excerpted/adapted from "Matthew" by Tom Long, pp.282-3). Then we will hear, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant."